

An oil painting illustration of a man and a woman in a tropical setting. The woman, with blonde hair, wears a vibrant orange dress with a ruffled neckline and has her eyes closed in a state of bliss or unconsciousness. The man, with dark hair, wears a brown military-style jacket with red decorative buttons and a white lace cravat. He is leaning over her, his hands resting on her arms. In the background, a white house with a porch and a chimney is nestled among lush green trees.

# Island of Promise

**MADELEINE CARR**

In a tropical paradise of desire and deception,  
she found a tender, long-lost love!

  
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DESTINY'S STAR COMING FROM  
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**ISBN 0-671-44183-3**

*"Have It Your Way, Wench,"  
He Growled.*

His other hand went quickly to the drawstring of her bodice, and in a moment it was undone and the top of her gown was falling away, exposing her heaving breasts. He encircled her wrists in one of his hands and held them above her head as he glared into her flaring green eyes. . . .

To Geneviève, who had been fighting for her very life a moment before, it was incomprehensible to feel a sudden strange stirring in her body, to have a fleeting thought of returning his kiss. She had kissed Seth many times, but had felt nothing even resembling this. She struggled again, trying to twist herself away from his captivating embrace. Yet the more she fought, the more he seemed to become inflamed with desire. . . .

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**MADELEINE CARR**



**PUBLISHED BY RICHARD GALLEN BOOKS**  
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## *Prologue*

### *Savannah, 1779*

On October 3, 1779, Savannah, Georgia was in turmoil. Safely in British hands for almost a year, the city had been surprised by the unexpected appearance of the French fleet at the mouth of the Savannah River. Under the command of Admiral Charles-Henri, Comte d'Estaing, the fleet had successfully blockaded the port when it was joined by American troops from South Carolina and southern Georgia. The combined forces had surrounded the city and put it under siege.

But that had happened two and a half weeks ago. The British had been expecting an attack long before then, and were grateful for the delay. Each day that d'Estaing and the American general, Benjamin Lincoln, hesitated allowed them more time to strengthen their defenses.

Most of the civilian population were British sympathizers, but there were a few scattered patriots within the city. Two of them stood excitedly behind the attic window of their townhouse. With the aid of a telescope, they were spying out the positions of the French and American camps in the piney woods west of the city. They were Seth McKenna, age eleven, and Geneviève West—"Genny"—age eight.

"Can you see your father?" Genny asked the boy, who never let her use the telescope for very long.

"Good Lord, Genny, we're too far away to make out people. I can hardly see the uniforms." Seth considered himself very much her superior. After all, he was three years older, and she was a *girl*.

Genny grew tired of Seth's bossiness, but he was her best friend and to shield his pride she sometimes let him have his way. Especially in this. Seth had been shocked then hurt when his mother had refused to let him accompany his father to South Carolina to join up with General Lincoln's American forces. He talked of nothing but war now; indeed, it was difficult for either of them to talk of anything else. War was a harsh reality in their young lives.

Genny's father, William West, had been killed in the American retreat when the British captured Savannah. Fiery and outspoken, West had been one of the leaders of the patriot cause. He had left England at the age of thirty, with meager savings but plenty of ambition. That was in 1769. Soon after he arrived in Savannah, he met and impressed Jacob Stirling, a successful dealer in naval stores. Stirling also happened to have two daughters of marriageable age, Clara and Rachel. William married Clara, the elder, and was welcomed into the business. Not six months later, Stirling, who was corpulent and drank heavily, fell dead while inspecting a stand of pines, and William became a wealthy man. He and Clara remained in Stirling's house, and Rachel went to Paris to study music. Never in robust health, Clara was a fragile beauty, and her demure ways were well suited to William's impetuosity. It was not long before William found himself becoming embroiled in the politics of independence. His avid reading of the French thinkers during the time of his daughter's birth impelled him to give her a French name, Geneviève. As she grew older, it became increasingly apparent that Genny had inherited his temperament.

They had a special relationship, father and daughter. In the unreal days following his death, Genny sat numbly in his darkened study, surrounded by the leather volumes that had meant so much to him. She was oblivious to everyone who tried to comfort her and ate very little.

Clara lay in her upstairs bedroom, consumed with grief at the loss of her husband and ill with her second pregnancy. It was only when Clara lost the baby, a boy, that Genny put aside her own sadness. In her father's absence she would have to be strong. It was what he would have wanted.

Genny gradually regained her zest for life and her green, almond-shaped eyes again began to shine with intelligence and a bent for mischief. It was the innocent green depths of those eyes that saved her from the consequences of her frequent pranks. She loved the outdoors, where she escaped from her lessons as often as possible. Her mother thought her far too active for a female child, and was dismayed at the unfashionable freckles the girl acquired. It was not that Genny neglected her studies. She quickly learned needlework and other feminine skills from her mother, but she much preferred the challenge of books. She had been taught to read at an early age by her doting father, and when he allowed her to sit in the background during literary and political discussions in his home, she both amazed and amused his friends with her burgeoning knowledge.

Genny was the pride of her mother when she accompanied her parents to church, dressed carefully and behaving in her most proper manner. Her chestnut hair, streaked golden from the sun, framed a perfect oval face. Already apparent were the delicate, high cheekbones of the aristocrat, softened by the slight retroussé of her nose. Her small features bore the rare promise of success and fulfillment granted to women of exceptional beauty and spirit. Hardly a sabbath passed when someone did not comment on Genny's beauty, and Clara basked in these compliments.

Genny remembered those carefree days, but now they seemed gone forever. With her father dead, her mother failing to regain her health, her city occupied by hated foreigners, she was acutely aware of the transience of life. Even her own home could be taken away at any moment. When they had taken Savannah, the British had confiscated most of the homes and property of patriots. It was only because of the concern of Governor Wright over her mother's condition that they were able to remain in their small but elegant townhouse.

Clara's friend Ellen McKenna and her son Seth had moved in with them when their home on Broughton Street was taken over as an officers' billet. Ellen had refused to flee while Clara remained behind. She proposed to nurse her ailing friend, care for the children and attempt to maintain a household as well as possible in the hostile city—tasks that kept her busy most of the day. Genny and Seth, freed from lessons and strict supervision, were developing a fierce independence.

The children heard Ellen calling to them from the second floor. "We're in the attic, mother," Seth yelled. "We'll be down in a while."

"Come down here this *minute*," Ellen called back. The children hastily scrambled down the narrow stairs. When they reached Seth's mother, her face was drawn and she shifted a crumpled handkerchief from hand to hand. Genny felt a shudder of fear.

"Genny," Ellen said, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder, "I want you to fetch Doctor Lawson. Tell him it's urgent. I know it's the sabbath and he'll probably be entertaining guests, but you must not take no for an answer."

"Is it mother?" she asked timidly.

"Yes, child, but you are not to fret. . . ."

"Mother," interrupted Seth. "*Let me go. I should be the one to go.*"

"You go with her, Seth. But Genny is to do the asking. The doctor will find it more difficult to say no to her."

Seth took Genny's hand as they hurried down the wide, sandy street, which was bustling with activity. The population of Savannah, usually numbering less than a thousand, was swollen by twice that number because of the British troops and hundreds of slaves from Governor Wright's plantations who were working frantically to fortify the city. No one knew when the attack would come. Trees and lumber from dismantled houses were being hauled through the streets to bolster the defensive works, and the children had to dodge the heavy, rumbling wagons. In their path, a boisterous crowd of civilians jeered two men who were being roughly escorted to the jail by a uniformed guard. As he pushed his way through, Seth glanced at Genny to see if she were frightened.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Skulkers," he answered, his small body rigid with disgust. "Cowards trying to hide so they won't have to fight."

"What will be done to them?"

"Let's hope they'll be put into the front lines and be the first killed when the attack comes."

"Seth!"

"This is war, Genny. Think of our fathers!"

Genny compressed her lips into a thin line, and quickened her pace at Seth's urging. Tempers were on edge everywhere



as the strain of the two and a half week siege took its toll. Everyone, including the British command, had expected the attack to come long before now, yet the allied forces were holding back for unknown reasons. Although dreading the actual attack, the citizens seemed to grow even more apprehensive with its delay. There was as much talk of possible reprisals against the British for having sacked the city when they came as there was talk of victory.

The children climbed to the first floor landing and stood before the imposing entrance of Dr. Lawson's house. Genny lifted the heavy brass knocker before Seth could reach it, and banged it loudly. The door opened to reveal the stern face of a huge black woman wearing a starched white apron—the size of a bedsheet it seemed to the children.

"We have come for Dr. Lawson," said Genny before the woman could utter a word.

"Not on the sabbath, child," the woman stated firmly.

"But my mother is ill. He must come," Genny insisted.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough for that, missy. Now go along with you."

"But you don't understand. . . ." offered Seth.

Just then there was a commotion of men's voices in the hall. "What's this, Hatty?" came the booming voice, which the children recognized as Dr. Lawson's.

"Children, with no business being here, sir. Go about your dinner."

Seeing her opportunity, Genny brushed past the woman's skirts and boldly marched down the hall to confront the doctor. Seth, recovering himself, followed quickly behind.

"Genny West! What brings you here today?" asked the doctor.

"It's my mother," Genny said. "Mrs. McKenna says she needs you at once. You *must* come."

"It's William West's daughter," said one of the doctor's friends.

"Ah, yes, the patriot," said another derisively. "We don't need to ruin our meal for the wife of a traitor, do we, Lawson?"

John Lawson's face turned cold. "This child's grandfather was Jacob Stirling, one of this city's most honored citizens and a dear friend of mine. Whom Clara married is of no conse-

quence; she remains my friend. Come, child," he said, taking Genny's small hand in his. "Let us see to your mother."

"John Lawson, you came," whispered Clara.

"Did you think I wouldn't, my dear?" he said softly. His heart sank as he felt the heat of the fever rage beneath the skin of the delicate hand she offered him. He knew at once that this frail woman could not possibly survive the ravages of fever. There was nothing he could do for her. But Genny . . . ? How could she deal with the deaths of both of her parents within the year?

When he comforted Clara all he could, he joined the anxious Ellen and reluctantly confirmed her fears.

Genny found it difficult to sleep. She had been put to bed earlier than usual by a distracted Ellen who would answer none of her questions. To the child, Ellen had not seemed herself. She had dabbed continually at her eyes, claiming they were irritated. When Genny finally drifted off into a fitful sleep, it was amid covers tangled by her restless tossing. In her dream, she was seated with her mother and father before a sumptuous feast. The gleam of candlelight on the silver cast a merry glow upon the faces of her parents as they talked and laughed. They had forgotten to serve her plate, and she was powerless to do so herself. They seemed not to notice her, though she called their names. She began to scream, but her cries had no effect. At that moment, she was startled awake by a loud clap of thunder. She shivered in a nightgown damp with perspiration. Lightning flashed, repeatedly illuminating her room, but no rain fell.

"Genny!" It was Seth, bursting into her room in his nightclothes. "The attack has begun!"

"What? It's only thunder."

"That's no thunder, Genny. It's cannon fire!"

She rushed with Seth to the window, where they stood fascinated by the brilliant explosions. Shells were falling from every direction and the impact caused the windowsill beneath their hands to tremble. In the street below, many people were rushing about in wild confusion. Their terrified shouts reached the ears of the two children only to be drowned out again by the sound of the cannon.

"Children! Get back from the window!" Ellen's voice was suddenly behind them. "Quick, we must get to the cellar."

"But, mother, we can't see from there!"

"Don't argue with me now, young man." Grasping them both firmly by the arms, she propelled them down the stairs and into the cellar.

"Now, I want you both to remain here until I come for you. You will be safe here, don't be frightened."

"But, what about mother?" Genny protested.

"Your mother cannot be moved just now. Letty and I will tend to her. You must not fret." Ellen kissed them each on the forehead, and was gone.

Seth and Genny looked at each other cautiously. Both were determined not to show fright.

"Are you scared?" Seth whispered.

"No. Are you?"

"Of course not." Just then, a cannonball exploded close by and they both jumped. "This is an awful place to be," Seth fretted, looking gingerly about the damp room. "I'd rather be able to see what's going on. Look, if we stand on those barrels we might be able to see out of the grill. Come on."

Seth made ready to boost Genny to the top of a large barrel when he lost his footing on the earth floor. He sprawled backward against an empty barrel, knocking it over. "Ouch," came a muffled protest from the dark behind the barrels. Both children went rigid at the sound.

"Who's there?" Seth asked, praying there would be no answer.

"No friend of yours!" came the arrogant reply. A handsome, swarthy youth rose up before them, holding their gaze steadily in his startling, pale blue eyes. In his right hand he held a cudgel threateningly. "Are you Whig or Tory?" he demanded.

Seth leaped to his feet. "This is a patriot house," he answered defensively. "Who are *you* to ask?"

The boy slowly let the cudgel fall to his side. "Then I have chosen well." He smiled in relief.

The children stared in amazement at this bold intruder. "Who are you?" asked Genny. "You're not an American."

"So, you do have a tongue, little girl." The youth grinned.

"Yes," she snapped, "I have a tongue—and better manners than you!"

The boy laughed. "And a sharp tongue, I see. Please excuse my manners. And to answer your question, no, I am

not an American." His tone was mocking, but his extraordinary eyes twinkled at Genny.

"Why are you here in our cellar?" Seth asked.

"For the same reason you are. I have no wish to be cut in half by a cannonball."

"If that's true, we would give you shelter," Genny said calmly. "Why were you hiding?"

"I was only resting here when you startled me."

Seth was doubtful. "It seems a strange story to me."

"To me, too," Genny said. "What is it that frightens you?"

The boy threw the cudgel across the room in frustration. "If you really want to know so badly, I am a deserter."

Seth recoiled. "A deserter? You're afraid to fight?"

"I am *not* afraid to fight, you pup!" The boy clenched his fists. "But I will not fight for those English dogs any longer."

"But *you* are English. What on earth are you talking about?" asked Genny.

"It's true, I was born in England, but they are my enemies as much as yours."

Seth was becoming weary. "I don't know what you want from us, but you can't hide down here forever."

The boy threw up his hands. "I don't want to hide in your bloody cellar! I want to reach the French lines. I want to fight *against* the English!"

"Then we'll help you." Genny smiled.

Genny and Seth were elated with what seemed to them a stroke of good fortune. At last they could take an active role in the conflict. Ellen must know nothing of their activities, not even of the boy's presence in the cellar. Seth would have to sneak into the pantry for food before his mother returned.

As the boy bolted his food, he was aware of his new friends watching him anxiously. He could trust them, he thought, and slowly began to relax. Well, he *had* to trust them. They were so young though. Anything could happen, and he did not want to endanger them any more than necessary.

"I will not tell you my name," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "and I do not want to know yours. This way, we will both be protected. If someone asks you, you will be able to say you have never heard of me, nor I of you." He waited for them to agree, then continued. "I was a captain's servant aboard one of the ships in the harbor. My master was one of the worst in the fleet. I vowed, after the first week of my service, to escape at the first opportunity. I

feel no loyalty to His Majesty's Navy. I was *forced* to sign on."

"You were forced?" asked Genny in amazement. "Your parents must have cared little for you!"

"My parents are dead," he stated, his eyes growing cold. "My uncle, whose ward I was, chose this life for me. He cared nothing for me. And now I care nothing for him, or for his bloody country. I am thirteen, but I can do a man's work. And I can do a man's fighting, if I can only reach the French lines."

Seth's eyes grew wide. "But if you fight against the English, how will you ever be able to return home?"

"England holds nothing for me," the boy said harshly. "They let my father die in debtors' prison, and my mother froze in the streets of London begging for food."

They were suddenly aware of the silence. The shelling had stopped and Ellen's footsteps were heard on the cellar stairs.

"Quick, hide yourself!" Seth whispered.

Genny and Seth ran to meet Ellen, to keep her eyes from their secret. She embraced them and led them up the stairs, saying, "I want you to help me bring your bed things into the cellar. Heaven only knows what is going on, but they've ceased for now. I think it would be safer for you to sleep in the cellar tonight."

Seth shot Genny a knowing glance. Had Ellen not been so harried, she would have wondered at the children's lack of protest. When she had them settled on their pallets, she gently stroked Genny's head. "I must go upstairs now to Clara. You two are not to worry, you're both very brave."

When Genny was sure that Ellen had gone, she tiptoed with a coverlet to where the boy was hiding. She tucked the coverlet around the already sleeping figure.

They were awakened prematurely at five A.M., when the bombardment began again. It was to continue, with terrific noise and confusion, throughout the day, while they made their plans for the boy's escape. Seth was to sneak out during the daylight to inspect the British lines for a possible escape route. Ellen, exhausted from lack of sleep and worry, would only check on them periodically, and Genny assured them she would be able to conceal Seth's absence.

Outside, Seth found he could maneuver through the streets with relative ease despite cannonshot whistling through the air. No one seemed to want to stop him, or to care about his



activities at all. Some of the cannonballs were exploding as they crashed into houses, others as they hit the ground, but many were landing only to have their fuses extinguished in the deep sand. Luck was with him, but he did not tarry.

The British had done their work well during the long interval of siege. They had set up a tight chain of redoubts encircling the city, with sentries posted between them. It appeared impenetrable. Their only hope of reaching the French lines would be by river. Seth observed that there was much confusion on the quays, where many small boats were evacuating women and children to Hutchinson Island, directly across the Savannah River. If they could somehow procure a boat, they would be able to row downriver and skirt the British defenses altogether. The tide would be right at about ten o'clock that night, and he knew of a creek that would take them very near to their destination. He rushed home in anticipation of the adventure to come.

While Seth was away, Genny felt shy in the boy's presence. She wanted to express her concern for him but, unable to think of the right words, she slipped upstairs to Seth's room and returned with a warm jacket. The boy had escaped with nothing but the clothes he wore, linen breeches and a jersey. He smiled his thanks as he donned the jacket, which was much too small.

Seth returned breathless, stumbling over his words to tell them all he had seen. "It can be done," he exclaimed. "I've found a way!" Then he told them of his discoveries and the route they must take.

Under cover of darkness, their hearts pounding, the children removed the grate and slid through the opening. They made for the river, Seth leading the way. Reaching the quay with no trouble, they drew into the shadows of a stone warehouse to decide how they should proceed.

"So far, all is well," the boy whispered. "But where will we find a boat?"

Her eyes accustomed to the darkness, Genny had been observing the sentries further down the quay. They were guarding a line of British war ships riding high, now empty of their cannon and seamen. She pointed to batteaux tied beside the ships. Yet, they could think of no way to steal one of the boats without going into the water, and the tide was rushing seaward too swiftly for them to swim. On the point of

despair, they heard angry voices erupt on the water below them.

"Damn you, Wilson! We should be up further, to dock with the other boats."

"It's the tide, sir. I'll wager you could do no better."

"All right. We can tie up here and have the sentries get this poor excuse for a boat. Let them have another chuckle on my behalf. To think that I had to deliver my wife's commode to her in the dead of night in the midst of war! It's beyond me."

The children crouched low in the shadow of the warehouse and watched two disheveled men climb up to the quay and hurry off to inform the sentries. Instantly, they knew that this was their only chance. As soon as it was safe, they made for the boat, and were in it and away before anyone noticed.

"Stay close to the bank," warned Seth. "I can barely see and we must not miss the creek."

The tide and rapid rowing took them swiftly past the last remaining high area of Savannah and along the rice flats just downriver of the city. "There it is," cried Seth suddenly, and they strained to pull themselves into the narrow creek.

"We made it!" the boy breathed as Genny clutched his arm in excitement. He smiled at her in the moonlight and roughly slapped Seth's back in congratulation. His expression changed then to one of concern. "But how will the two of you get back?" he asked. "You aren't strong enough to row against the tide."

"Don't worry about us," said Genny. "We know about boats."

"Yes, think of yourself. We can manage," answered Seth, beginning to row. "We'll take you further up this creek and into the woods. When we return, the tide will be right for an easy row back to the docks. We should arrive well before daylight. We won't be found out."

The night had turned chilly. Genny, wearing only a thin dress, began to shiver. When the boy noticed her discomfort, he hastily removed the jacket she had given him and thrust it toward her. "It is too hot for this," he said. "You take it."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "I'm not cold. It's only the excitement."

The boy had known only a few girls of Genny's age, and he had never met one as stubborn. There was no denying her beauty, but she was as brave as any lad he knew.

Judging that they had rowed far enough, they drew up to a sandy bank and scrambled ashore to survey their position. "Look," cried Genny, "we've brought you almost to the camp itself!"

Not far in the distance they could see the tents and cookfires of the French. None of the three spoke for a moment. When the boy turned to his friends, his face was somber. He pulled himself up to his full five feet, six inches, and folded his arms across his chest. "I must go now, but . . ." He hesitated. "But I want you to know how grateful I am to you. You have risked your lives for me, a total stranger. I will repay you, I promise. After the battle, when we win, I'll . . ." His eyes returned to the French camp. "You will see me again," he said, and was gone.

The bombardment continued for another five days. During that time, the boy endeared himself to the French. His bravery was attributed to his youth. Finally, Comte d'Estaing and General Lincoln marshalled their forces for the attack. The predawn silence of October 6 was broken by the harshly melodic strains of a lone bagpipe drifting across the marsh from the British lines. The entrancing but defiant sound sent a chill through the French and Americans. Only the boy was unaffected. He was accustomed to the use of the bagpipe as a psychological instrument of war.

When the attack began, he managed to be among the vanguard of the main assault and joined heartily in the French battle cry, *Vive le roi!* But the British held, and when d'Estaing himself fell wounded among his dead and dying troops, it was the boy who found him and waited by his side under a hail of fire until help could be summoned.

Two days after the battle, the boy was found tending a cookfire for the dejected, grumbling French soldiers. An officer, with a blood-stained bandage ringing his head, yanked him up by the ear and told him to follow. The boy was taken to the makeshift hospital where d'Estaing was recovering from his wounds. The officer said that the vice-admiral wanted to see him, but warned that he was in a foul temper. The boy entered the room on tiptoe, hoping not to disturb him.

"How old are you, boy?" growled d'Estaing.

"Thirteen, sir," he replied timidly.

The vice-admiral's face opened into a broad smile. "You

have shown unusual bravery in this unfortunate episode, *mon petit guerrier*. Thirteen, eh? Well, nevertheless, I am personally indebted to you. I am, how does one say, *indisposed* at the moment, but your loyalty will not go unrewarded."

True to his word, when the *Languedoc*, d'Estaing's flagship, departed the Georgia coast for France, the brave youth sailed with her.

## Chapter 1

### *Savannah, Spring 1789*

The two riders galloped across the manicured lawn before the great house, and reined in sharply. Flushed and laughing from their exertions, they handed over their mounts to a waiting groom, and hurried to join the woman waving to them from the doorway.

Guy-Pierre d'Binet bounded up the steps to embrace his wife, Rachel. Pausing on the lower step, Guy-Pierre's riding companion watched the reunion of the d'Binets with a smile. Although disheveled from her ride, the girl was still a remarkable beauty. Her tousled auburn hair was streaked golden by the sunlight, and her almond-shaped eyes were a sparkling green. A liberal scattering of freckles across the arch of her tilted nose lent an air of mischief and health to the classic delicacy of her features. A hint of stubbornness in her small chin was balanced by gently curving lips. The mussed condition of her riding habit did not conceal the lush curves of her breasts, or the graceful lines of her body. When the girl joined the d'Binets, Rachel teasingly admonished her and Guy-Pierre about their messy appearance. Having ridden through a sudden shower, their habits were soaked and mud-spattered.

"Geneviève, look at you," she despaired. "You have forgotten to wear your hat again. If it hadn't rained, you



would certainly have acquired more freckles. No, *ma chérie*," Rachel determined, waving away the girl's laughing protest, "it is true. And before the ball, *quoi!*"

Geneviève was forced to turn away to conceal her mirth from her aunt. For the moment, Rachel's voice could have been that of Geneviève's mother. Both women had waged an unceasing yet hopeless battle against Geneviève's unfashionable freckles. Even liberal applications of buttermilk and lemon juice had proved futile.

"I have ordered tubs filled for both of you," Rachel continued. "When you have finished, Geneviève, perhaps you would like to try on your gown for the ball?"

"Oh, Aunt Rachel!" exclaimed Geneviève. "Do you mean it has finally arrived? I was so worried!"

"We were all concerned," breathed Guy-Pierre in relief. "Now, perhaps this household can return to normal."

The ball, which was to take place on the following evening, held great significance for these three people: this was to be the formal announcement that Geneviève West had become the legal heir of Rachel and Guy-Pierre d'Binet, and henceforth would bear their name. For the occasion, Guy-Pierre had ordered from Paris a gown of the latest mode for Geneviève. The style had not yet reached Savannah, and he well knew that such a creation, enhanced by Geneviève's natural beauty, would create envy and emulation among the ladies of their society. He wanted her to taste the thrill of dictating fashion. When the gown had not arrived as expected, no one felt greater disappointment than Guy-Pierre. But, now that the dress was safely delivered, he was delighted, and felt that nothing could mar the evening for Geneviève.

Stepping from the steaming water in the copper tub, Geneviève wrapped herself in the Turkish towel that Rachel held for her.

"Do I notice a frown on your lovely face?" Rachel asked quizzically, smiling at the girl as she dried her long, tawny hair. "Could this be a *crise de nerfs* before the ball?"

"No, not that," Geneviève said, her brow smoothing. "I'm not nervous, but I was thinking of the ball. Tomorrow night I will become Geneviève d'Binet. Do you think that I've made a wise decision, Aunt Rachel? I wonder if my mother would

have approved. You are her sister, and the two of you were very close. No one else can tell me how she would have felt."

"Let me answer you in this way, *ma chérie*," Rachel said, with a look of sadness. "I was the younger sister, and your mother pampered me and cared for me throughout my childhood. When word reached me in France that she had died during the fighting in Savannah, I was heartbroken, and I vowed that I would care for her child. Your uncle has joined me in that effort. You know, Geneviève, that you cannot inherit under the terms of your uncle's estate unless you become his legal heir and take the name of d'Binet. Your mother was a practical woman. I am sure she would not see you forgo the benefits of Guy-Pierre's name and fortune. If anything should happen to us, your uncle and I must be sure that you are protected. Does this reassure you, child?"

"Yes, Aunt Rachel, thank you," Geneviève said, slipping an arm around her aunt's waist. "Now that my mind is at ease, shall I try on my gown?"

"The gown, of course!" Rachel cried. "For the moment, I had forgotten. Here, now, you should be the one to open this."

Accepting the parcel from her, Geneviève stripped the wrappings from it, then removed the gown and held it at arm's length. Her face glowed as she viewed the delicate length of material.

"How exquisite it is!" she breathed. "The fabric is as fine as lingerie. Our fashions seem gaudy by comparison."

Geneviève slipped the dress over her head and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. With long, tight sleeves and a raised waistline—sashed in the palest yellow satin ribbon—the flowing, white fabric emphasized her full breasts and clung to her slender thighs as she moved. At the hem, a design of iris, each blossom entwined with the next, provided the only embellishment. The petals of each flower were formed of seed pearls, with the leaves and stems stitched in gold thread. The gown was completed by yellow satin slippers that matched the sash and were laced with ribbon across her instep.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps it is too revealing," Geneviève frowned.

"No, no, *petite*. It is revealing, yes, but not shocking. It is a gown for a woman. Only the French could create a gown of such magnificent simplicity. *Bien sûr*, subtlety is their genius. When Seth sees you in this creation his head will swim."

"Yes, Seth will like it, I am sure," Geneviève agreed as she returned to the mirror. Darling Seth, she mused. If only I could love him as he deserves. Her thoughts turned to the handsome man who, as a child, had been her constant companion and was now her betrothed.

Though Seth was the most eligible of Savannah's bachelors for the wealth and social position he could offer a wife, this was not what Geneviève valued. She esteemed the private man, his strength and gentleness. From the brave, bossy little boy who had challenged her every word had grown a solicitous man, a man who took her every wish into account. She thought of Seth as she had last seen him. His wealth of fine, blond hair could never be quite subdued, seemed always in motion. She pictured his tanned face, the crinkles at the corners of his blue eyes as he studied the blue and green hues of the marshes for his paintings. Geneviève chuckled softly, thinking of Seth's long-legged stride as he walked his plantation. How many times she had attempted to match his pace and failed.

Seth McKenna had become a complex man. A man who, had his responsibilities been fewer, would have preferred to paint the vivid colors of his coastal plantation rather than reap its harvest. Geneviève sighed. No woman could ask for more in a man. Yet, her feelings for him had not changed since they were children. He evoked now the same tenderness and caring that he did then. Surely, to *love* a man must be more. Geneviève had never experienced anything that resembled her fantasies. But, instinctually, she had resisted her family's urging that she and Seth no longer delay their marriage. Even Seth's mother, Ellen, whose counsel Geneviève had relied on since the terror of the Savannah siege, had not changed her decision to postpone the wedding. But she knew she could not delay indefinitely, and to reject Seth totally was an intolerable thought. The pain and disappointment she would cause Seth and both their families would be enormous. Perhaps, with a little more time, she could find for Seth the love she must feel in order to give herself completely.

"My dear, you are the thoughtful one today," Rachel teased. "Come, now, let me arrange your hair and you will be perfect."

Handling the silver brush deftly, Rachel smoothed the shining chestnut locks, pinning them atop Geneviève's head and forming soft ringlets to frame her face and cascade down

her shoulders. Her aunt then entwined a fragile branch of leaves fashioned from the thinnest beaten gold through the burnished curls.

"Venus will be mad with envy of a mortal such as you, Geneviève," she pronounced, surveying her handiwork. "Now I must go and see if Guy-Pierre has finished his bath. Hurry downstairs, he will be impatient to see you."

Geneviève smiled as she thought of the uncle who had become a foster father to her. Guy-Pierre d'Binet's ancestry was an ancient and revered French line, famous in Europe for its wealth and power. Guy-Pierre was in every sense a d'Binet. With his warm, dark eyes and crisp, black hair, he had been considered a Romeo by many of the more conservative families of Savannah. His years in Saint-Domingue as a plantation owner of the *grand blanc* class had contributed vast wealth to his family's coffers, and many whispered stories to his reputation. Although the wags of Savannah had watched him carefully, he had failed to provide them with fuel for gossip following his marriage to Rachel Stirling. He was a devoted and attentive husband and, following the death of Geneviève's mother, had welcomed his little niece into his home with the kindness and concern of a father. The disappointment in finding that his adored Rachel could not bear children was lessened by the arrival of this child.

The delight he found in Geneviève was enhanced when he discovered that she was accomplished far beyond her years. The education begun by her father was continued by Guy-Pierre, who regaled her with stories of his travels and adventures and personally coached her in the arts of riding, shooting and fencing. In her presence, he, too, became a mischievous child. Enormously amused to overhear Guy-Pierre boast to friends of his beautiful daughter, Rachel teased him on occasion by addressing him as *le grand papa*.

"So, you have finally finished," Guy-Pierre exclaimed as Geneviève descended the stairs. "A man could grow old waiting for a beautiful woman to complete her toilette."

"Not you, uncle," Geneviève retorted, amused. "You will never grow old."

"Well said, *petite*," Rachel laughed. "Now, Guy-Pierre, what do you think? Is she not fit for a queen's ball?"

"She is that," he said softly. "Geneviève, you are a daughter any man would be proud of. Now, let me look at

you carefully. Yes," he declared, "the gown will be a great success. However, it does not seem complete."

"Not complete!" Rachel exclaimed. "Guy-Pierre, what could it lack?"

"I have something in mind, *ma chérie*, patience,"

From the hidden drawer of a carved chest, Guy-Pierre drew a russet velvet box trimmed in old silver. As the women watched, he carefully inserted a tiny key and opened the lid. "This jewel belonged to my mother. It has been worn by the women of my family for generations. And, now, Geneviève, it must belong to you. I would be pleased if you would wear it to the ball tomorrow night."

Guy-Pierre fastened the necklace around Geneviève's slender throat. The great yellow diamond, surrounded by matched pearls, lay in the cleft of Geneviève's breasts suspended from its heavy, gold, serpentine chain. The excitement in the girl's eyes was no less bright than the sparkle of the shining jewel.

"*C'est incroyable!*" Geneviève breathed. "Uncle, you are too good to me."

"No, Geneviève, I am the fortunate one. Now you are complete."

"Oh, Geneviève," Rachel cried, embracing the girl. "I would have all your days as happy as this one. But there is more. The blue salon has been arranged for the ball. You must see it."

Geneviève could not imagine how the blue salon could be improved. This was her favorite room in her uncle's home. Appointed in the delicate tones of a seashell, its French windows—each capped by a fanlight—opened onto a marble-paved terrace that afforded a magnificent view of the salt marsh. She had spent many happy hours in this room, sometimes seeking the cool solitude of the terrace to read or reflect.

"Now, Geneviève," Rachel said as they approached the salon, "you must imagine how the room will look when it is filled with gay and beautiful people."

Rachel pushed the heavy doors aside to reveal the salon, bathed in the late afternoon sun.

"Aunt Rachel! You have done wonders!" Geneviève gasped. Surely, she thought, there has never been a more exquisite room.



Watered-silk wall panels of aquamarine complemented the deeper teal-blue of the drapes, which were caught back from the open windows with ropes of silver. A sea-breeze stirred the prisms of the crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the domed ceiling. In the crimson light of sunset, it shone like a bell of fire. At the far end of the highly polished parquet floor, now bare of rugs in preparation for dancing, a lattice bower, banked with spring flowers, had been erected for the musicians. Graceful silver urns filled with flowers from Rachel's gardens were randomly placed along the walls. Fresh cut, the blossoms filled the room with their delicate fragrance. The terrace tables were bare, ready to display enormous silver platters of oysters, *baba au rhum* and coolers of champagne. Already, the kitchen of the great house seethed with activity as the servants prepared these delicacies. Tiny, fragile meringue-baskets filled with candied violets and rose petals—favors to be given to the ladies—lined long, filigreed trays. The delicate cheese wafers and spicy sauces to be offered with the succulent oysters graced bowls of fine lead-crystal. But the oysters would be gathered and shucked at the last moment to insure freshness. By this hour tomorrow, the barren tables, transformed by crisp, pale aqua linen and glittering candlelight, would be filled to overflowing with the delicious fare.

"Aunt Rachel," Geneviève said, surveying the preparations, "thank you."

Rachel's face flushed with pleasure. "It is nothing, *ma petite*. But enough of this. Guy-Pierre, Geneviève has had quite enough excitement for the day. She will be exhausted."

"That is true," Guy-Pierre agreed, taking Rachel's hand. "We should all rest before dinner. It will never do for you to look wan, Geneviève. Nothing must spoil your ball."

Guy-Pierre sat at his desk in the library after dinner. He signed his name to one last paper and sighed as he looked across the room at Rachel and Geneviève. The night was chilly and they were reading contentedly by the fire. Guy-Pierre lit his pipe and leaned back in his chair, wholly at ease and pleased with his life. He became pensive thinking back over the circumstances that brought him to this point. He thought of his life in Saint-Domingue, where he, as his father's second son, had gone as a young man to make his fortune. He thought of the ease with which he had amassed

money, and his free, libertine life. There were the fine wines and entertainment, and every man's dream of his choice of women. It was a life that should be lived by any free thinker—for a time. He had sown his wild oats with the best of them, but he had begun to yearn for something else, something permanent. And for him it could not be found in Saint-Domingue. On the recommendation of a friend, he had come to Savannah to see if that city held anything for him, and had found Rachel. They had become friendly because Rachel had studied music in Paris for a time, and had even visited his home in the country. He was as taken with her as she was with him. That had been six years ago. . . .

There had been a property available that suited him, a confiscated Tory rice plantation on a small island called Jasper's Landing, just south of Savannah. He had purchased it and refurbished the vast house in the French fashion, and they had moved in. Within two years, he had had the plantation prospering again.

There was nothing more he could want, he thought, as he looked at Rachel. Geneviève was perfect for them, and tomorrow night they would announce to the world how they felt about her.

"Monsieur d'Binet?"

Guy-Pierre was startled by the strange voice suddenly behind him. He leaped to his feet and turned to face a surly, bedraggled man with close-set eyes, grinning at him. He wore filthy white trousers and a moth-eaten jersey and in his belt was a large, menacing knife. His cocked pistol was pointed directly at Guy-Pierre.

"Who are you?" demanded Guy-Pierre. He heard Rachel cry out behind him and he motioned for her to be quiet. Both women were on their feet, Rachel holding Geneviève behind her.

"Are you Guy-Pierre d'Binet, formerly of Saint-Domingue?" the man asked haughtily.

"I am," stated Guy-Pierre calmly. "And I demand to know who you are, and by what right you have entered my home."

"*Monsieur.*" He smiled and indicated the pistol. "This is my right, and this my left." He withdrew the knife.

Guy-Pierre heard the women gasp behind him. He must do something quickly. This man would not be put off by reason. He slipped his hand swiftly beneath his coat to his back, where he had carried a small, loaded pistol since his days in

unpredictable Saint-Domingue. But he was not fast enough. The man caught his movement and lunged forward, thrusting the knife into his chest with a sickening, muffled thud. Guy-Pierre's pistol fell to the floor as he slumped helplessly to his knees in mortal pain.

Both women ran to his side, oblivious of any danger to themselves. Rachel, on her knees and sobbing, embraced her husband. Geneviève crouched on the floor beside them. She grasped Guy-Pierre's outstretched hand, but with her other hand she groped for his pistol, which now lay concealed by her skirts. When she had it, she touched his hand briefly to her cheek, then looked up at the man whose face was frozen in a maniacal grin at the scene before him. She watched him bow and say, "Monsieur d'Binet and ladies, greetings from *le grand Pearl*."

At those words Guy-Pierre gasped and attempted to rise, but only fell back into Rachel's arms. As the intruder watched, distracted, Geneviève shot him.

He fell back, gripping his shoulder. Geneviève leaped to her feet to run for help, but before she got far he ordered her to stop. She turned to see his unfired pistol leveled at Rachel's head.

"You shall pay for this, *ma boule*," he threatened.

"No!" Geneviève pleaded, and ran back. "Shoot me instead."

"Not now, little one. I need you now." He struggled to his feet and motioned her to his side. Placing his bloody arm around her shoulders and the pistol to her waist he growled, "You have done this, and now you must help me escape."

Rachel watched as the man disappeared with Geneviève through the open garden door. Her soul felt as dead as the man in her arms.

Geneviève struggled under the weight of the foul-smelling man hanging on her shoulder. Blood was seeping down from his shoulder and drenching her bodice. When they reached the riverbank, there was a man waiting in a small boat. Shoved from behind, she stumbled and brushed against him as she fell into the boat. He began rowing them out into the darkness. Before long, they bumped joltingly against the side of a large sloop that was anchored about a mile downriver from the plantation. There were gruff voices as several men gathered at the low railings of the ship to pull them and the

boat aboard. They spoke in patois, but Geneviève could understand them.

"What is this, Jacques? A present for us?"

Her abductor clutched at his wound as he held himself up by the ratlines. "Keep your slimy hands off her. She's no present for you, or for anyone. The bitch shot me. Look at me, I'm bleeding like a stuck pig." There was uproarious laughter from the men at this, but they stopped abruptly when Jacques leveled his pistol at them. "Shut up, you fools. If you want to live to laugh again, you'll get this ship underway and be quick about it." There was grumbling, but the men did as they were told.

Geneviève was shoved ahead of Jacques down a dimly-lit companionway, and ordered into the man's musty-smelling cabin. "The master's cabin," Jacques chided her. "And you will find that that is what I am, your *master*. Victor!" he called. The man who had rowed them to the ship entered immediately.

"Tie her, Victor. She'll have to wait for her pleasures until I stop bleeding." He smiled conspiratorially at Victor, then sat on the edge of his bed to watch Geneviève for her reaction. "Hurry man, do you want me to bleed to death?"

Victor, his huge stomach jutting out before him, strode toward Geneviève, his eyes fastened to her bosom. His arm shot out suddenly, and he laughed when she ducked. She saw then that he was only reaching for a coil of rope hanging behind her.

"Get on your knees," he ordered, and knelt to tie her hands and feet. When he had finished, Victor pulled her around to face him. His beady eyes dropped from hers down to the bare skin above the bodice of her dress. Her stomach knotted in dread of what he would do next. She thought she would be sick if he touched her. His slack mouth revealed rotting teeth, and he was filthier and more odorous than Jacques.

When he put his gnarled hand to her breast, she jerked back in horror. This made him laugh again, for her bonds prevented her from moving far.

"She thinks I want her, Jacques." He chuckled. "When all I want is this." Roughly, he pulled the diamond pendant over her head, hurting her, and held it close to his face. His tongue circled his lips and his eyes grew wide as the jewel cast its brilliance over his features.

"Bring it to me, Victor," Jacques growled.

"No! It belongs to my family, please don't take it! I will give you money instead," she pleaded, realizing her utter helplessness. Her cries fell on deaf ears.

As Victor attended to Jacques' wound, Geneviève cursed herself for wearing the diamond to dinner. Rachel had advised her to wait until the ball, but her vanity would not allow her to part with the gift so soon.

Jacques began to snore. Victor, turning to gaze at Geneviève one more time, snuffed out the cabin's only candle and left. In total darkness, Geneviève could feel the ship moving in the water, each moment taking her further away from her home. Her anger and shock were now turning into fear. She was bound and helpless, kidnapped by Guy-Pierre's murderer! She was afraid to sleep, but she drifted into unconsciousness.

The next two days were like a dream-sleep. Periodically, she was brought tepid water and bowls of gruel. She sipped at the water, but turned her head away from the vile gruel Victor offered in large spoonfuls. When she finally awoke, the ship was no longer moving. The light was dim, and she felt numbness in her hands and feet. Her eyes came to rest on the man propped up in the bunk, staring at her.

"So, you are awake at last," Jacques said mockingly. "And you are uncomfortable, no? Well, so am I," he added, pointing to the bandage on his shoulder.

Geneviève did not answer him. She wanted to cry, but the need not to show weakness was even greater. The heat in the cramped, airless cabin was bearing down on her like a great weight.

Jacques raised a half-empty bottle of rum to his lips, spilling it down his chin. "I have found you very stimulating, little one, as I watched you sleep. You were breathing deeply and heaving your breasts at me without shame." He chuckled. "Alas, I am immobile, like yourself."

Geneviève blushed helplessly at his words. She felt such a surge of anger that, had she not been bound, she would have flung herself at him and scratched out his eyes.

"But perhaps this immobility is a good thing," he continued, "Or I would be having my pleasure with you at this moment. Yet, now I think it is better that I deliver my prize fresh. Jacques Argo looks first after his future. My friend will appreciate my restraint, and reward me more."

What was he saying, wondered Geneviève? Was she to be delivered to someone else?

Victor entered the room, carrying a bundle under his arm. He closed the door behind him and stood silently, waiting for instructions.

"Good, Victor," Jacques said. "I think it is now time we got her undressed."

Geneviève's heart began to pound wildly at his words.

"It is not what you think, little one," laughed Jacques. "We are merely going to provide you with suitable clothes. Go ahead, Victor, but bring her closer to me. My eyes can feast even if my body is not able."

Victor dragged Geneviève roughly to the side of the bunk and, beneath the glaring eyes of Jacques, untied her feet. Immediately, she felt sharp, stabbing pains in her feet as the blood began to circulate again. Victor then withdrew a knife from his belt, grabbed her clothes by the waist and sliced them from her. She turned her face away as the two men stared at her naked body.

"Nice, eh? You may touch her, Victor, but that is all. I plan to deliver unsoiled merchandise this time."

Geneviève felt the menacing hands begin to explore her body. She was sick with dread. With her hands bound behind her, there was nothing she could do against two armed men. But she began to struggle anyway. When Victor's assault proved more than she could bear, she screamed, and the sound that came from her rent the air with a power she had not known she had. Then came a blinding pain to her head, and, mercifully, unconsciousness.

Jacques Argo was a man of little station in Saint-Domingue. He had power of sort among his own kind—the lawless breed that flourished easily on the edges of any liberal society. On the island of Sant-Domingue he was termed a *petit blanc*, one of the lower-class whites who comprised shopkeepers and small planters trying to rise on the social ladder, and more prosperous men who were sliding down. Jacques was at the very bottom rung of this class. Moreover, he had made a powerful enemy on the island, Madame Simone Bourget.

Madame Bourget was not of the ruling *grands blancs* class. She was a *femme de couleur*, a third-generation descendant of a slave and her white paramour. She had been groomed by

her mother in the social graces and the ways of pleasuring men for the ultimate purpose of marriage to a *grand blanc*—the next best thing to being identified as white herself. This, as yet, she had not been able to attain. But, in the process, she had achieved a certain social prominence among the men of the *grands blancs* class—if not their women. She maintained a salon in town that attracted the most influential men of the island because her parties and informal gatherings were the gayest and most gossiped about. Her power was in the social realm only, but it was a power to be reckoned with.

Jacques Argo waited nervously in the back room of Madame Bourget's house. When she entered the room, he was quick to say, "It is done."

"What proof do I have? How do I know you aren't lying to save your filthy hide?"

He seemed startled. "Look at my shoulder. I was almost killed myself," he babbled. "And her, ask her. She saw me do it." He pointed to Geneviève, lying unconscious on the floor, dressed in sailor's clothing with her hands bound behind her.

"This is a girl?"

"Yes. The bitch who shot me."

"Who is she?"

"D'Binet's daughter."

Madame Bourget was incredulous. "D'Binet has no daughter! He could not have had a daughter of her age, you fool!"

"But she *is* his daughter, I tell you. She was there in his home, with his wife. She shot me after I killed d'Binet!"

"*Mon Dieu*," moaned Madame Bourget. "What have you done? There is no way of knowing who this girl is, or who may come looking for her. You have ruined everything!"

"But, madame . . ."

"Shut up and let me think." She began pacing the room. "What could you have been thinking to bring her here? You are, of all the men on this island, perhaps the one most lacking in common sense. And I *chose* you!"

"But madame . . ."

"Shut up. Did you mention my name to her?"

"Never!"

"Good, then I won't have to kill you. But I must tell you that your life holds little value for me."

"But you said . . ." he sputtered. "You said if I killed d'Binet, I would be freed. You gave your word!"

"Yes, I gave my word, you weasel. And Madame Bourget keeps her word, as d'Binet found out. Listen carefully, my friend. You may go, but I cannot guarantee your safety on this island."

"Thank you, madame." He began backing away, meekly nodding his head.

"Wait," she called. "This girl, has she been violated?"

"No, no, madame. Do you think I would dare to . . . ?"

"You had better be right, fool. Now leave my house."

Geneviève opened her eyes and saw a blurred figure above her. At first, she imagined she was back aboard the ship, in its dark, musty cabin with the foul-smelling Frenchmen. She began to whimper in her semi-conscious state. But the voice she heard was a woman's voice, and it was soothing. She raised up unsteadily on her elbow. "Where am I?" she asked groggily.

"You are with friends, little one. Rest easy. No one will harm you now," said the woman gently.

Geneviève was fully awake now and sat up quickly, only to be struck by a sharp, throbbing pain in her head. She brought her hand to her temple and felt the lump made there by the Frenchman's blow. "What has happened to me?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

"That is precisely what I intended to ask you," said the woman. "My man, Sebastien, found you lying in an alley near the docks. He brought you, still unconscious, here to me. My name is Simone Bourget."

"Now I remember," said Geneviève, shaking her head. "They tried to . . ."

"Tried to what, little one?" Madame Bourget moved closer to Geneviève. "Who are 'they'?"

"I don't know who they were. They killed my uncle. . . ." She broke into sobs. "And they kidnapped me. It was horrible. . . ."

"There, there." Madame Bourget patted Geneviève's shoulder. "You must pull yourself together. There's no time now for hysterics; you may still be in danger. Tell me all you know," she said, solicitously. She pulled a handkerchief from her bodice and handed it to the girl.

"My name is Geneviève West." She caught herself. "I mean, Geneviève d'Binet. I have just changed my surname to



that of my uncle, Guy-Pierre d'Binet, of Savannah, Georgia," she explained. Saying his name again caused tears to well up in her eyes.

"One night—I have lost all track of time—a Frenchman, a horrible, filthy man, burst into our home and for no reason killed my uncle right before my eyes. Then he took me with him to his ship and kept me bound in his cabin. It was. . . ." she faltered. "I can't speak of it now."

"Did he harm you? I mean, did he . . . ?"

"I was not treated well, but . . ." she hesitated again. "I'm still a virgin, if that is what you mean." She blushed. Then, regaining her composure, she added, "I shot one of them."

"That's good," said Madame Bourget encouragingly.

Geneviève looked about her again. "But now, I have no idea where I am."

"You are in Saint-Domingue, my child. In Port-au-Prince."

"Saint-Domingue! My uncle is—was—from this island. He lived here for years before coming to Savannah."

"Yes, I know his name. He was a fine gentleman."

"You *knew* him?"

"This is a small island. Everyone here knows everyone else, and their *histoires*. Monsieur d'Binet once visited in my house."

Geneviève could not believe her ears. "Oh, Madame Bourget," she said, taking the woman's hand, "you're a friend of my uncle, and my savior. Merciful God, how could I be so lucky?"

Simone Bourget frowned and pulled her hand away, to Geneviève's amazement. "I am not your savior, my dear. There is much yet you don't know. But if you do as I say, your life will be spared. I will protect you from your enemies."

"But I want to go *home*!" pleaded Geneviève. "Could you help me get back to Savannah? I can assure you that you'll be repaid far beyond what it will cost."

"You will return home in due time, Geneviève. But we must be careful. As yet, we don't know who your enemies are, so we must proceed with caution. Until we can act with certainty, you will be safe in my house."

Geneviève saw the wisdom in Madame Bourget's reasoning and agreed. "But must I stay in hiding? And in these clothes?"

"Of course, I will find you something to wear. And you

must want a bath, too, and food. I'll have my own *cocotte*, Margrit, help you."

"Your *cocotte*?"

"Yes, dear, a *cocotte* is a lady's attendant, her personal maid. You will be very comfortable here. But I think it's best that no one knows you are *chez moi*. There are many people in and out at all times of the day and night, so don't worry if you hear anyone in the hall."

"I thought this was your home, Madame Bourget. You make it sound like an inn!"

Madame Bourget's eyes narrowed. "No, it's not an inn. It is my home. But I have a very heavy social responsibility, and I conduct a salon here for the benefit of my friends." Her face softened and she added, "And sometimes a few of them overindulge in wine and become . . . frivolous, shall we say? Pay no attention to them. I'll keep your door locked to prevent anyone from bursting in unannounced."

"Oh, *madame*. Locked? I'll feel like a prisoner," Geneviève protested.

"It's better this way, Geneviève," Madame Bourget soothed. "You'll see."

Geneviève heard the click of the lock and felt a moment of panic. She was safe for the moment. Or was she? She had just been assured that she was out of danger, but there was something very suspicious about this Madame Bourget. She seemed nice enough and she was a friend of Guy-Pierre's, but there was something . . . perhaps, it was only that she was too upset to be consoled by anyone. She should be more optimistic. Yet, ringing in her mind were the words of Jacques Argo: "Deliver my prize . . . my friend will reward me . . ." Surely, Madame Bourget could not be this friend? No, she must not think of this now! She must rest. Perhaps later she could think more clearly.

Madame Bourget turned the key in the lock and exhaled deeply. She felt the responsibility for the girl as a heavy yoke about her neck. What was she to do? Damn that stupid Jacques to hell! The girl knew nothing now, but in time she would make the connections. Another killing would have to be avoided. But this Geneviève must not remain in Saint-Domingue, and she must *never* be allowed to return to Savannah. No, never. . . .

## *Chapter 2*

Captain Judson Talbot conferred with his first mate, André Falcon, over the cargo manifest. Everything seemed to be in order. "Check to see if the casks are stowed properly, André. We don't want rum filling our bilges this trip, or we'll find it difficult to maintain an able crew." He laughed. "Then, batten the hatches. We'll be sailing for Charleston on the morning tide."

"Aye, captain," said the wiry little man. André was sixty if he was a day. "And what about the crew?"

"Liberty tonight. In fact, I'll go ashore myself. I've seen nothing of the town except this filthy waterfront. You don't mind, do you, André?"

"No, captain," the first mate said, massaging his forehead. "Last night will do me for a while, I think."

Talbot laughed and slapped the mate's back. "You're getting too old for that, my friend."

"I have a few more years, captain." André smiled wryly. "You'll find a bath in your cabin, and if you wake me before you leave, I'll be fresh for the watch tonight."

"I doubt that, André. No one can be fresh in this damned heat."

"Aye that, captain."

It was late afternoon, but the tropical sun was still master of the human intruders on this lush, frantic island. The vivid green of the mountains rising behind Port-au-Prince con-

trasted sharply with the soothing azure-blue of the broad bay in which his ship was anchored. Judson thought it was one of the most beautiful places he had yet seen. But daily rains and oppressive heat made it an environment kind only to nature, not to the human species. At least, not to those fresh from the rigors of a French winter. Yet, there was no lack of humans in evidence. The island of Saint-Domingue was the most prosperous of all the French colonies, and the discomfort of the climate was easy to overcome, especially for those eager to make their fortunes. In France, "rich as a Creole planter" had become a common gauge of financial status.

Riches were here for the taking, and Judson Talbot intended to swell his own coffers. Captain and owner of his ship, the *Liberté*, at the astonishing age of twenty-three, he was already on the high road to fortune and fame. A certain amount of money had been made available to him through a benefactor, but this was to be repaid. It was Judson's intent to make his own way, and this he would do by plying the lucrative triangular trade-route between France, Saint-Domingue and the newly independent America. France hungered for Saint-Domingue's sugar, and the island planters, growing richer by the day, hungered for the finer things from France. He would make a short side-trip carrying rum, a by-product of sugar and banned by brandy-conscious France, to the thirsty Americans.

After scrubbing the sweat and grime from his body, Judson paced his cabin, letting the water evaporate on his skin and cool him. He was restless now that his work was done, and there was no more work until morning, when his ship would sail. This place he was going tonight, the salon of a Madame Bourget, was only a diversion to while away a few hours since he had read all the books he had brought along for the voyage. Social activities were not as important to him as to his friends. He had other priorities for the present. Because of this, and some difficult experiences in his youth, Judson seemed older than his years.

Perhaps Madame Bourget's salon would serve as a place to make business acquaintances. It had been highly recommended by friends in France as the liveliest salon in Port-au-Prince, and therefore the retreat of the best gentlemen. It was said to have an extraordinary wine cellar, and to provide the most invigorating conversation and the most beautiful female companions in town. Well, he would judge that for himself!

He pulled on soft, tan breeches, which fit his muscular legs and narrow hips like a second skin, then white stockings and buckle shoes. He donned a white shirt with ruffled cuffs, and cursed at having to put on anything else in the cloying heat. Though Judson was not a slave to fashion, tonight he dressed in a manner suitable to his station in life, which was unusual. He had not been born into the nobility—far from it—yet he had been educated as if he had, and counted as his friends those of the noble class. He was accepted among them, yet he felt limited, and in many ways he was. Society here would not be as discerning as in France, and perhaps he would be more comfortable.

Reluctantly adding to his outfit a snug, white vest, a sword and a knee-length, dark green frock-coat, he inspected himself in his shaving mirror. He was a formidable figure, over six feet tall and broad-shouldered. His well-defined muscles rippled under the tight-fitting clothes; thick, black hair was parted on the side and combed loosely back to just below his collar. A seaman's tanned face set off glistening white teeth and striking, pale blue eyes. Yet, his face was kept from being merely pretty by the strong set of his jaw, and a cleft chin that he cursed every time he shaved. His smile, slightly off-center, sometimes appeared to be mocking.

In the waning hours of sunlight, the waterfront was still bustling with trade. There was a tension in the air of impending rain. The *Liberté* was moored 500 yards from shore, and Judson was rowed into the capital of the richest country on the globe through a sickening mass of floating garbage and debris. He stood in the dusty landing area of the shore, waiting for a carriage to take him through the equally dusty streets of Port-au-Prince. His nose was assaulted by great, foul-smelling heaps of mango seeds and banana peels, burning chicken feathers and rotting fish. He laughed to himself. This legendary capital of luxury resembled, more than anything else, a pigsty!

Once in the carriage, he noticed that the ramshackle warehouses soon gave way to tiny, one-and two-story wooden houses, many of them taverns with drunken men and women stumbling in and out of their dark doorways. The streets were narrow, but filled with a rollicking humanity intent on pleasure. The carriage was forced to detour because of a cockfight in the street. Chickens and dogs pranced freely under the horses, and at one point his carriage almost collided

with a careening cart. Its driver, a handsome white youth, was waving a bottle of rum. His black female companion held on desperately with one hand, covering her eyes with the other.

In the *Grande Rue*, the houses were larger and colorfully painted, but not of the type one would find in France. There were jewelry and clothing shops in abundance. Judson noted a small bookseller's shop nestled, barely visible, beside a much larger shop which specialized in horse decorations.

Madame Bourget's house was at the end of a row of similar tall, narrow residences. A young, well-dressed mulatto woman answered the door and invited him inside. His credentials were the names of his friends in Paris, and when he presented them, she disappeared to return immediately with a tall and beautiful bronze-skinned woman, who smiled, offered her hand and curtsied deeply.

"Captain Talbot, I am honored. Simone Bourget welcomes you to her house and our humble city. I hope we shall be great friends."

"Madame Bourget," said Judson, touching his lips to her hand.

She turned to the *cocotte*. "Margrit, bring us cognac in the salon, and see that we aren't disturbed. I wish to become acquainted with this gentleman without interruption." She faced Judson again and smiled seductively, taking his arm and leading him into a formal room, darkly-shuttered and lit with candles. As they walked, she explained, "We must keep our houses shuttered in this climate, captain, to temper the heat and discourage the insects. I find it a most comfortable solution, contributing as it does to a more restful atmosphere. One conducive to the forming of friendships, *n'est-ce pas?*"

The room was painted white, and contained only the necessary furniture. Its starkness seemed completely natural in the overbearing heat of this country. A more crowded room would only have intensified the smothered feeling that Judson found difficult to ignore in Saint-Domingue. They sat and received their drinks from Margrit, and then were left alone.

Judson found himself sitting opposite a most beautiful and prepossessing woman. She had thick, straight, black hair, finely arched brows, a thin, straight nose and an arrogantly tilted chin. Her eyes were black and and smoldering. Taller than most men, she had a slender, full-breasted figure.

Judson imagined she could be overwhelming in bed. But her ease of manner went down as well as her excellent cognac. She knew how to relax a man, bring him down from the frantic vicissitudes of the business world. She appeared to be well into her thirties, but without the cares of a husband's demands or children, she had maintained a youthful ebullience in her facial expressions and conversation. Truly, there was something about her. . . . He detected a mysterious quality that whispered of a darker knowledge of the world.

Madame Bourget was indeed offering all her charms to Judson Talbot. She found him very exciting, a notch above her usual clientele in both looks and intelligence. She thought he must be quite a ladies' man in France.

"Do you prefer to be addressed as captain, or by your title, sir?" she prodded him.

"I have no title, *madame*. I am not of noble rank."

"But, your friends, captain. I thought . . ."

"As well you might. I merely have good connections, Madame Bourget." He laughed. "Things are changing in France, you know. Even some of the nobility are adopting liberal views."

She implored him to tell her all the latest news from France, and they enjoyed several more glasses of cognac before Judson began to feel the effect of the strong wine. He did not like to get drunk in places where he did not feel entirely at home, so he told Madame Bourget that he must go.

"I shall endeavor to make your stay here as pleasant as possible, Captain Talbot," she said. "If you have need of anything, I shall be at your service. Will you be staying in the hotel?"

"No. I have unusually comfortable quarters aboard my ship. Besides, I'll be sailing in the morning."

"No, *pas vrai*, captain! Not so soon?"

"Yes, *madame*, I'm afraid so. But I'll return on my next visit, if I'm welcome."

"You will always be welcome here, sir." She leaned forward to touch his knee. "I sometimes have accommodations in my house for certain gentlemen who must remain unexpectedly in town. I can assure you, they are of the highest quality."

Judson felt the heat of her hand go through him like a

searing wind. It had been a month since he had had a woman, and Madame Bourget was anything but distasteful. He was not a man to hesitate on questions such as this, but tonight, unaccountably, he did. "I thank you, *madame*. You are a gracious and promising hostess, but tonight I must return to my ship and settle some final accounts before morning," he lied.

Madame Bourget was piqued. He had pleased her, she would have liked him in her bed. But he had declined to stay. There were not many men who would turn down such an invitation, and he did not seem the shy type. She would win him over the next time, she thought, but perhaps tonight he would prefer a younger, less experienced woman, in the privacy of his cabin. Perhaps she could kill two birds with one stone. She smiled. . . .

Madame Bourget entered the bedroom quietly. As her eyes adjusted to the shadows, she noticed the slender form of the girl on the bed.

"Geneviève, are you asleep?" she asked.

"No, Madame Bourget, I'm only resting. The heat is intense," Geneviève said as she rose from the pillows.

"It is late," Madame Bourget observed. "The heat will soon diminish. You will find our evenings are more pleasant. For now, Geneviève, I have something very interesting to tell you. Recently, I have made the acquaintance of a young man who *may* be of help to you. His name is Judson Talbot. He is French and obviously a gentleman, though I know little else of him. His ship lies at anchor in the harbor. This suggests possibilities, eh? I have made arrangements to send you to him tonight so that you may become acquainted. I must caution you, Geneviève, not to discuss with Monsieur Talbot your true identity or circumstances. You must confide only in me. To fail in this could prove dangerous. You do understand, yes?" Madame Bourget studied the silent girl. "I believe that you do. *Eh bien*, you must get up and prepare yourself."

"You feel that this gentleman might prove helpful to me?" Geneviève asked.

"It is possible," the older woman said with a shrug, as she moved to the door. "I'm leaving a gown for you to wear. It belongs to my *cocotte*, and should fit you well. Your bath is waiting. I will return soon to see that you're presentable. If



you are charming tonight, who knows . . . ?" Her voice trailed off, as the door clicked firmly behind her.

Geneviève's eyes narrowed as she thought of Madame Bourget's words. There was a falseness behind the casually spoken instructions. Why was the woman so insistent that she be charming?

A chill of fear passed over her, but she resisted it firmly. I must stop this, she thought, pushing aside her anxiety. Somehow, I must turn this evening to my advantage. There may well be a chance of escape if only I can remain composed and think. For the moment, I must appear to comply with Madame Bourget's wishes.

Geneviève felt more confident as she lay in the fragrant water of her bath. Her thoughts raced ahead to her meeting with the man Madame Bourget had recommended. I must remember that he's not a friend yet, and I mustn't approach him as such, she reminded herself.

As Geneviève emerged from the tub, she glanced curiously at the gown the *cocotte* had provided. Its leaf-green color would undoubtedly be becoming. Quickly, she donned her chemise and stepped into the skirt. Adjusting the bodice, she tied the ribbon that laced beneath her breasts and turned to examine the effect in the mirror. "Oh, no," she gasped, staring at the image that confronted her. "This is impossible!"

The color was indeed becoming. Her lustrous copper-colored hair shone richly against the leaf tones of the material, and her green eyes were enhanced by the deeper green of the gown. But to her dismay, the neckline of the dress was so deeply cut that her breasts were almost exposed. The tissue-thin fabric laced tightly across her waist clung and flowed down her hips, revealing every curve of her body. Yes, it was too revealing, too sensuous!

As her anger and suspicion mounted, Madame Bourget commented from the doorway, "The gown is very becoming. Yes, it will do."

"It will *not* do," Geneviève cried, wheeling to face her. "This gown would only be worn by a woman of the streets. I won't be seen in it!"

"Ah," Madame Bourget sighed, stretching lazily, "we French are not ashamed of our bodies. Do not be foolish. The costume is appropriate to the occasion. Come, now, do not keep the gentleman waiting."

Furious, Geneviève snatched her shawl from the bed and draped it around her shoulders. "Very well, I'm coming," she said curtly.

When he was back in his cabin, Judson opened a bottle of cognac. He stripped off his upper clothing and settled down at his desk to study the charts for the voyage. When he saw how close Savannah was to Charleston, he wondered if he should take time to visit the city where he had spent such a hectic but ultimately rewarding time ten years ago. Events in Savannah had marked a turning point in his life. He would return one day, if not this time. He had made a promise.

Pouring another drink, he sat back in his chair and laughed at himself. Why had he turned down tonight's offer of going to bed with such a beautiful and exciting woman? Perhaps it is old age, he thought, and smiled. But the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced he had missed a delightful opportunity. He closed his eyes to imagine her body, when he heard a knock at the door.

André entered with a puzzled look on his face. "Sir, there was a man here who said he had something for you, compliments of Madame Bourget."

"Had something for me? Show him in."

"He's gone, captain, but he left a woman."

"A woman! Is this a joke, André?"

"I'll bring her."

In a moment, André returned with one of the most beautiful women Judson had ever seen. He could not believe his eyes. Madame Bourget had sent him this! What perfect timing. . . .

Geneviève entered the cabin cautiously. She disliked everything about this situation. The only thing on her mind was the last time she had been in a ship's cabin. Though this one was much nicer. Furnished, paneled and well-lit with oil lamps—it even had windows . . . . There was a chance that Madame Bourget had been telling the truth, for this cabin obviously belonged to someone with power and money.

Then she saw him. A towering man standing across from her, naked to the waist. She brought the back of her hand to her mouth in shock. He had not even tried to cover himself. She turned around and saw that his mate had left. Quickly, she tried the door but found it locked.

"What have we here, a little actress?" asked Judson, smiling. Madame Bourget must be complimented for her taste, he thought. The girl was lovely, and from what he had seen, it should be a lively evening. His body was already aflame from the cognac and his recent imaginings. And, now, just the sight of this sensual woman in such a daring dress was driving him wild.

He moved toward her, and Geneviève backed up against the door. She looked about frantically for something with which to defend herself, but there was nothing within her reach. Just as Judson was upon her, she ducked under his arm and ran behind the desk at the other end of the cabin. She picked up the cognac bottle to use as a weapon.

Judson threw back his head and laughed. "So, my lovely, you want to play games. Just as well, it excites me even more. You look as if you know your way about these things."

What was he talking about, wondered Geneviève. Was the man crazy? She watched him start for her, slowly, a lustful glint in his eyes. Her own eyes dropped lower and she saw the bulge in his already tight pants. Her throat felt dry and her heart was pounding as she gripped the bottle tighter. She wanted only to be away from this place, to be home again. She felt herself growing weak. No, she must, *she would* defend herself to the last.

He was reaching out for her when she brought the bottle down toward him. He jerked his head aside at the last minute, letting the blow of the bottle fall on his shoulder. Geneviève had struck him with all her strength, and the bottle broke when it hit. She saw blood stains on his shoulder before he grabbed her and pulled her violently against him. He covered her mouth with his, and she thought for a moment that his embrace would crush her. He held her so tightly she couldn't fight back. When he suddenly pulled away, she attempted to scratch his face, but he grabbed her arm.

"Have it your way, wench," he growled. His other hand went quickly to the drawstring of her bodice, and in a moment it was undone and the top of her gown was falling away, exposing her heaving breasts. He encircled her wrists in one of his hands and held them above her head as he glared into her flaring green eyes. With his other hand he cupped one of her generous breasts, taking the nipple between his

thumb and forefinger and turning it to and fro. Then, he lowered his mouth again to hers.

To Geneviève, who had been fighting for her very life a moment before, it was incomprehensible to suddenly feel a strange stirring in her body, to have a fleeting thought of returning his kiss. She had kissed Seth many times, but had felt nothing resembling this. She struggled again, trying to twist herself away from his captivating embrace. Yet, the more she fought, the more he seemed to become inflamed with desire. He held her tighter now, increasing the pain in her wrists. His right hand dropped to her waist, to where her dress was open, and slid down under the material to her belly. She felt a sharp sensation between her legs, but he hadn't touched her there! Then he did, and she gasped.

"Protest all you want, my little actress, but this cannot lie," Judson whispered. He could bear it no longer, and in one swift movement he had her dress over her head and off. He picked her up and carried her to his bunk. Then she was under him, his body pressing into hers. He was covering her with moist kisses as he fumbled with his breeches.

Geneviève felt something hard press against her belly. Meanwhile, his hand was gently massaging her womanhood, and to her horror she realized that she was wet there, wet and warm and yearning.

"Beautiful," he murmured thickly. Pausing a moment, he lifted his torso above her and they stared into each other's eyes. His, she noticed, were a startling turquoise, and something about them inspired trust, seemed almost familiar though she'd never seen the man before this night. For his part, Judson felt his passion mount to new heights as the girl's gaze flashed green fire at him.

Suddenly, he was smothering her with his body, and she felt his hardness probe between her legs. Instinctively, she crossed her ankles and held herself rigid, but as his hand brushed lightly over her calves, her thighs, her belly, her legs seemed to open of their own volition. Again, she felt his hand at her womanhood, exciting her, and his tongue searching deep within her mouth, seeking a response. Then he lunged and was inside her.

The piercing pain brought Geneviève back to reality. She began to fight against it, crying out. But the more she

struggled, pulled his hair and scratched against him, the harder he thrust into her. He was wild, his breathing coming in loud gasps. When she realized that her struggling was only exciting him more, she stopped. She felt nothing now and lay stiffly, letting him have his way. In a few moments more, he shuddered and let out a low moan.

She lay with her eyes tightly shut. His weight was crushing against her, but he was still. She was afraid to move; he might begin battering her again. It was only when he began to snore that she tried to extricate herself, and finally succeeded in rolling the dead weight of his body off her.

Geneviève, dressed in the horrible gown again, sat on the floor of the cabin with the man's coat around her knees. She wasn't cold, but she felt a need to cover herself. She felt numb, helpless. Her life was ruined, all her plans shattered. She could never marry Seth now, nor anyone. Good, sweet Seth. Of course, he would understand and probably insist on the marriage, but he would never be able to forget. No, she couldn't do that to him.

She shuddered at the realization of what had happened. At one point, she had *wanted* it! She was no better than he. What had happened to her? There had been feelings in her own body that she had never known before. Was that what lovers—what husbands and wives—were supposed to feel? If only it had been Seth! How could she have had those feelings with a stranger? She looked at the man sleeping peacefully on the bunk. He was handsome. He had the appearance of a gentleman. But he had behaved as no gentleman ever would. He had said things . . . horrible things. Yet, the most horrible thing of all was that she considered him handsome. His mind was ugly and she should think him ugly. She hated him with all her heart.

If only she could be home with Guy-Pierre and Rachel. If only Guy-Pierre were not . . . She began to cry, quietly. Perhaps she would never be able to return to Savannah. She had no friends here. Everyone she had met wanted to take advantage of her.

She stopped crying suddenly and sat up straight. She would not feel sorry for herself. It was too late. If this was her life now, she would have to become as hard and selfish as they and trust no one but herself. And *yes*, she *would* get home. Life in Savannah would never be the same, but she was

educated and strong, and she could make a new start for herself. She was no longer innocent, and there was always Jasper's Landing.

Geneviève did not sleep.

Judson awoke with a cottony feeling in his mouth. He heard the steady beat of rain on the deck above and looked out into the gray dawn. The harbor was locked in heavy fog. There would be no sailing in this, he thought. Then his mind clicked and he remembered. He jerked his head around and saw that she was gone from the bunk. As he jumped up to button his breeches, he spotted her glaring at him from the corner of the cabin and he relaxed.

"Good morning." He smiled. "I thought you had gone."

"How?" asked Geneviève, her face expressionless. "You have locked me in, or did you forget?"

"Oh, yes, that," he said, putting his hands to his head, which was fuzzy from the night's drinking. He felt a pain in his shoulder, looked down and saw the dried blood. "We had quite a night, eh?"

He turned then and noticed the blood on his bunk. "See, you've made me bleed all over this new quilt," he chided her.

"It isn't your blood," stated Geneviève, her eyes flashing hate.

"What?" He looked at her quizzically.

She didn't answer.

"Do you mean . . . ?" He hesitated. "Do you mean she sent me a virgin?" Geneviève remained mute. "Damn! Why didn't you say something, girl?"

Judson was furious. He began to grab his clothes, telling her to make herself presentable, that he was taking her back. When he was dressed, he grabbed her arm painfully and led her from the cabin.

Annoyed, Madame Bourget looked up from her desk as her *cocotte* entered the room. "Yes, what is it, Margrit?"

"*Pardon, madame*, but the gentleman . . . he insists he will see only you. It is Captain Talbot, and the girl is with him," she said, her eyes wide with concern.

"She is with him? *Mon Dieu!* Where have you put them, girl?"

"They are waiting in the small salon, *madame*."

"Will I never be rid of that wench?" she muttered. Her fist

clenched as she thought of Geneviève. "The d'Binets!" she hissed between her teeth, as she followed Margrit to the waiting couple.

"Captain Talbot!" she exclaimed when she entered the salon. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I believed you to be under sail for France at this moment."

"Perhaps I have misled you, *madame*," Judson said. "First I must sail for Charleston, in America, to deliver a cargo of rum. Then I return to Saint-Domingue for more goods. Only then do I go to France."

"I see," Madame Bourget said slowly, her eyes darkening.

"But I haven't come for conversation," he said. "The girl, I've come to return her." He eyed Geneviève, who had retreated to the corner of the room furthest from him. Her eyes blazed with fury as their gaze met.

"Return her? I don't understand. Perhaps we should talk in privacy, yes?" She turned to Margrit. "Take the girl to her room. She will stay there while Captain Talbot and I discuss this matter."

Geneviève jerked her arm from the *cocotte's* grasp. "Don't touch me," she said coldly. "I can find my way."

"I'm at a loss, captain," said Madame Bourget when Geneviève had gone. "Didn't you understand that she was a gift to you?"

His face dark with anger, Judson Talbot studied the woman. "*Madame*, I cannot accept a woman as a gift. She is not an animal, to be casually given as a pet. That she came for a night's pleasure is one thing, but more than that, no!"

"Ah, but Captain Talbot," she soothed, "perhaps it is I who have misled you. Do let me explain the circumstances before you go away angry with me. Occasionally, because I am well-known, a young girl will come to me for help. If her situation has become unbearable and it is possible to find a protector for her, well, then I assist her. So it was with this girl. She is young and very beautiful. I thought you would be pleased. And for the girl, what woman could fail to be grateful for a protector such as you?"

"I don't think she thinks of me as a protector, *madame*. She had never before been with a man. Were you aware of this when you sent her to me?"

"But of course! Had she not been of the highest quality, I would never have sent her. Come, captain, you would be doing the girl a great kindness to take her."

"I cannot dispute her quality," Judson said, remembering Geneviève's beauty. "But it is quite impossible to have a woman aboard my ship."

"As you wish, of course." Madame Bourget studied the face of the man who stood opposite her. Yes, she thought, the girl has stirred you, *mon brave*. I can see it in your eyes. But you are right about one thing, we cannot have our Geneviève travel with you to Charleston. It is much too close to Savannah for my comfort. "Captain," she began, pouring a brandy for both of them, "let us have a drink and relax. I think the problem is that you do not understand our ways. I'm not trying to give away a human being. All my actions have been for her benefit. Nevertheless, I shall keep the girl until your business in Charleston is completed, and then you may call for her before you sail for France. If, upon your return, you decide that you don't want her, well, then, I must find another protector. There is an end to my generosity, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Judson sipped his brandy. His face was expressionless as he asked, "Who is she, Madame Bourget? She is an American, I know that, and not of the common class."

"It is a typical story," the woman assured him. "She was in port with her uncle, the captain of a small ship. He treated her harshly, and at the first opportunity she left him. Of her family, who can say? Ah, these girls. I have seen it all too often. You mustn't take too seriously the bizarre tales she might tell you. I don't speak meanly, you understand. They only seek to become more attractive in the eyes of their gentleman by providing themselves with interesting backgrounds. Often, they speak of their wealth and of their terrible misfortunes. *Pouf!* It is a small fault, don't you agree?"

"Possibly, but I've yet to hear this one's story. Perhaps when I return, I'll have that opportunity. I'm making no promises, you understand."

"Of course," she said, her lips curving into a smile.



## Chapter 3

Charles-Louis, Comte d'Villiers, gazed complacently around Madame Bourget's handsome salon. The heavy lids of his dark, brooding eyes successfully concealed his thoughts from the other guests. At first glance striking in his impeccably tailored evening clothes, d'Villiers exuded an aura of power and sensuality. But, on closer inspection, the hooded eyes and full lips of the libertine spoiled a chiseled face that would have been handsome had it not showed obvious cruelty and self-indulgence. He was a large man, but moved silently. And his gestures were quick. His slightly hooked nose and flared nostrils lent a predatory air to his presence. The comte was not a young man, yet he was possessed by a raging vanity. Through fencing and riding, he remained superbly conditioned, and few men on the island would have welcomed an encounter with him.

Increasingly bored with the guests' foolish chatter, Comte d'Villiers tapped the polished surface of a mahogany table beside his chair. The talk had centered around the handsome young planter Jean Bousaide, and his clever accounts of his amorous adventures. Contempt curled the mouth of the older man as he observed the delighted laughter that concluded the latest yarn from the young *bon vivant*. D'Villiers was well aware of the falseness of these stories. The boy was impotent. Both men had shared the acquaintance of many of the island's

most beautiful women. These ladies had felt no compunction about passing on a bit of gossip to the virile comte.

At the slight tapping of the comte's fingers, Simone Bourget was instantly at his side. "Is there something I can bring you?" she offered. "I do hope that my little gathering isn't boring you."

"It is, Simone. But I am so easily bored." He spoke softly, letting a cruel smile play about his mouth. "Where is H      ? It seems hours that I've been here. I want her at once!"

"Pardon, Comte d'Villiers," Madame Bourget said. She had paled slightly at the insult, but her manner remained calm. "She will be with you immediately."

D'Villiers leaned his powerful shoulders against the chair and watched her departure with amusement. He knew the prestige that the patronage of a man of his wealth and social position afforded the house of Simone Bourget.

The power of the Comte d'Villiers was staggering on this small, corrupt island. As one of the wealthiest and least principled of the *grands blancs* of Saint-Domingue, he had enjoyed, to the point of utter dissipation, every pleasure afforded a man of excessive appetite and vast resources. He freely exercised his penchant for cruelty as the master of Bel Jardin, the largest plantation on the island. There his authority was absolute. No plantation in the colony required so frequent replacement of its slaves as Bel Jardin. Stories of d'Villiers' disgraceful treatment of his people circulated within the colony, shocking even the most callous. But the outrage of his peers was confined to whispers. No man was willing to incur the wrath of the comte.

"You have kept me waiting, H      . That is most unwise," d'Villiers scolded as a pretty, dark-haired girl approached him.

"It is only that I wish to look my best for you." H       smiled, placing her hand on the comte's arm.

Before the unwary H       could withdraw, Comte d'Villiers grasped the girl's small hand, squeezing it cruelly. The bantering conversation in the room died, and the guests stared in silence at the pain etched on H      's face. When he increased the pressure on her wrist, she swayed, and would have fainted had not d'Villiers then relaxed his hold slightly. The color slowly returned to her cheeks, but she was still held in the comte's iron grip.

"This will not happen again when I call for you, H  l  ne. You will be prompt next week?"

The girl's head bowed in silent assent to the demand.

"Is the private salon prepared for us?" d'Villiers asked.

"*Oui*, comte, it is," she replied, barely audible.

"Then shall we leave this brilliant company? I have no wish to share your charms with them."

As d'Villiers followed H  l  ne through the shadowed hallway to the salon on the second floor, a door was thrown open, and Genevi  ve burst into the corridor. Her eyes were wide with fear as she attempted to push her way past the two.

"Stop her!" Margrit cried. "She must not leave the house."

D'Villiers stepped into Genevi  ve's path and pulled her roughly against his chest. As she fought against him, he took in the russet sheen of her flying curls and the tense beauty of her face. When he had subdued her, he became aware of his rising desire for this girl that squirmed against his body.

"Oh, *merci*, Comte d'Villiers," Margrit gasped. "Madame Bourget would be furious with me had this one escaped. I am in your debt."

D'Villiers ignored the breathless Margrit. He pushed Genevi  ve from him in order to see her better. Holding her by the shoulders, he allowed his eyes to travel the length of her figure. Her clothing was in a shambles. Her twisted gown exposed the full, high breasts that rose provocatively as she breathed heavily from her struggles. The girl's green eyes darted fire as she attempted to shake d'Villiers' hands from her body.

"Who is this fierce one?" he questioned Margrit.

"Ah, comte, you should ask Madame Bourget. This is not a matter for me to discuss."

"Then call her, Margrit. I wish to speak with her about this girl."

"Yes, comte, but would you kindly take her to her bed-chamber? I cannot control her, as you see."

"Certainly, Margrit." D'Villiers smiled. "We mustn't lose this one." He turned abruptly to H  l  ne. "You may go," he dismissed her curtly. "I have no further need of you."

"Now, fierce one," he said as his hands slid around Genevi  ve's waist and dropped to caress the rise of her buttocks, "we must see that you don't try to run away again."

Genevi  ve jerked away to avoid the exploring hand, only

to be swept from her feet and carried into the small bedchamber. Setting her down again, d'Villiers reached out and grasped the Titian skein of her hair. Before she had recovered her balance, he had drawn her to him and covered her mouth with his. Geneviève could feel the excitement rise in his body as her breasts pressed against his jacket. Slipping his hand between their bodies, he cupped her full, rounded flesh and explored the nipple with his fingers.

Abruptly, he stepped away from her. But his sensual, hooded eyes continued to feast on the curves of her body. "There will be time enough when I've talked with your keeper." He grinned. "What luck to have happened upon you just as I tired of Hélène."

Terrified, Geneviève heard the key turn in the lock before she dared move. She fell across her bed, her face burning with fury and humiliation. Violent images of her encounter with d'Villiers continued to flash through her mind, and she trembled at the memory of his hands against her skin. She knew that this man was merciless. The cold glitter in his heavy eyes spoke graphically of his character. How could she have been so unfortunate? Even Judson Talbot, though he had taken her against her will, had not caused her to feel as she did now. She was repulsed by this stranger and felt soiled by his touch.

In an effort to calm her mind, she rose from the bed, and poured some water from the pitcher into a large white porcelain bowl. Removing her clothing, she sponged her body and allowed the cool breeze from the window to dry her damp skin. She felt more composed. The moon was rising, and by its light she could see the flowers of the courtyard below her window. Her thoughts turned again to Judson Talbot. He would kill this man if he knew that he had touched me, she reflected. Shocked by her own musing, she laughed harshly. "What a fool you are, Geneviève," she said aloud. "Judson Talbot cares nothing for you. He is no better than this one." But even as she thought this, Geneviève was not all sure that it was true. She slipped her chemise over her head and willed herself to forget the young sea captain.

Madame Bourget flung open the door to Geneviève's room, startling the girl.

"You little idiot. Have you any idea of the problems you've created now?" the woman demanded. "Nothing would please

me more than to take a lash to you." Passing a hand over her hair to smoothe it, she gripped the nape of her neck as if in pain and sank into a chair beside the door.

"Problems I have created?" Geneviève was astonished.

Slowly, Madame Bourget raised her head and stared at the girl. The eyes in her contorted face shone with anger.

"Idiot," she hissed. "By your absurd attempt to escape, you have aroused the interest of the very man on this island you would have best avoided. Through this folly of yours, I am placed in a most dangerous position. And you . . . you little fool, will pay most dearly, though not at my hand. This man who foiled your escape is Charles-Louis, Comte d'Villiers. He has ordered that you be made ready for him. His carriage will call for you in the morning. I've told him that Monsieur Talbot is your protector, but nothing will dissuade him. Geneviève, he is a formidable man, and a deadly enemy if I should oppose him. But, I'll do exactly as he demands, and so will you. I will not incur the wrath of the comte on your account."

Geneviève held her temper through Madame Bourget's tongue-lashing. She knew that it was to her advantage to listen. She noted the harsh lines of fear on the woman's face, and realized that a man who could draw this response from Simone Bourget was indeed formidable.

"Attends, Geneviève," Madame Bourget commanded. "I haven't yet told you the entire story. This man to whom I send you is very likely the murderer of your foster father, Guy-Pierre d'Binet." Geneviève gasped. "Yes, it is so," the woman continued. "My sources have sent this information, and they have never failed. It is good that d'Villiers knows little about you. He believes that you are Geneviève West, an American. He mustn't learn that you are a d'Binet. He would kill you if he knew the truth. As it is, you will have the greatest difficulty with him. But, I won't let him kill you . . . if only for the sake of Monsieur Talbot. I have no love for you."

"And I, none for you, Madame Bourget," Geneviève blazed. "Am I to thank you for sending me to this animal who killed my father? Should I feel gratitude for the chance to play mistress to a man who would gladly murder me as well?"

To Geneviève's amazement, the woman smiled. "There is spirit in you," she remarked. "You will find a need for it

quickly enough, *ma chérie*. The Comte d'Villiers is a devil. Even I wouldn't pit myself against his cunning. But he does desire you. That will be to your advantage, if you exploit his need. Now, to bed with you. D'Villiers' man will call for you at dawn. And, Geneviève—that you might not spend yourself hating me to excess—I did not give you over gladly. *Bonsoir*."

As the first heat of the island morning flowed into her room, Geneviève rose from the rumpled bed. Sleep had been impossible, knowing what the morning would bring. She resolved to draw on all her resources rather than allow the murderer of Guy-Pierre to see her cringe in his presence. Margrit tapped at the door to announce that her bath was prepared. "I'm coming," she called. And breathing deeply, she braced her spine for the ordeal ahead.

By the time Geneviève was called to the small salon, she had been bathed, dressed and coiffed for what seemed hours. She entered the room to find Madame Bourget in conversation with a golden-skinned girl near her own age. When the two turned to face her, Geneviève was struck by the perfection of the girl's features. Her straight, delicate nose and wide, chocolate eyes had taken their loveliness from more than one race. She would have been a great beauty had there been the slightest warmth in the elegant contours of her face. But her cold expression, in contrast to her glowing skin, gave Geneviève a moment of discomfort.

"Geneviève," Madame Bourget said, "this is Odile. She has come to escort you to Comte d'Villiers. She will, I believe, perform as your *cocotte*. Yes, Odile?"

"Yes, *madame*. Comte d'Villiers wishes it." The girl's voice was heavy with disdain as she spoke to Madame Bourget. She did not even favor Geneviève with a glance. Her manner implied that she was assuming duties beneath her accustomed station.

"We must go now," Odile said, arranging her exquisite, embroidered shawl. "The carriage is waiting."

Geneviève's heart lightened as she watched Odile descend the stairs. The *cocotte* was a very small-framed girl. Surely, such a frail keeper could be overcome once they had traveled beyond the scope of Madame Bourget's watchful eye. Perhaps there was still a chance to escape, even now.

But when the door to the street was opened, Geneviève's

spirits sank. It was no wonder that d'Villiers had entrusted the tiny Odile to bring Geneviève to him. On the driver's platform of the stylish carriage sat the largest black man Geneviève had ever seen. His enormous arms swelled his livery coat to bursting, and the face he turned to the women as they approached the carriage was that of a slow but dangerous brute.

Odile looked coldly at Geneviève as she noticed her dismay. "It's only Samson," she said. "He can be useful, though he is stupid, as you see." Slowly, Geneviève entered the carriage. She had never felt more hopeless. "We're ready now, Samson. Drive on," Odile called.

With a lurch, the carriage rolled down the street at a smart pace. Geneviève was aware that Odile was studying her from beneath her long, dark lashes. But, the *cocotte* did not speak and Geneviève felt no desire for conversation with her sullen companion. Odile was the first to break the silence.

"It is only a few blocks that we are going," she said. "We could easily walk the distance if the streets were fit to travel on foot."

Before Geneviève could reply, the pace of the carriage slowed as it approached the colorful throngs making their way to the largest market in Port-au-Prince. Women with babies on their hips and huge baskets of produce balanced on their heads milled about the carriage. Their chatter and laughter mingled with the squeals of tethered pigs and squawking chickens. Children piping on small bamboo flutes kept pace with the horses, teasing Samson for a ride and leaping nimbly to avoid the lash of his driving whip. Dust and heat and color whirled around the carriage. A heavy odor of flowers, fish and overripe fruit reached Geneviève's nostrils from the thatched stalls baking in the sun beside the roadway. She glimpsed several women squatting in the shade of a pepper tree, weaving baskets from strips of dried palm fronds. They glanced up curiously as the carriage passed, but their dark, flying fingers did not cease to work the cream-colored husks. Nostalgia rose painfully in Geneviève as she was reminded of the gaiety of her trips to the Savannah market with Rachel and Guy-Pierre.

The carriage lurched to one side as Samson turned into a shaded side street. The riot and color of the market were left behind.

"It is just ahead," Odile informed Geneviève. "We are

going to the comte's townhouse. You are fortunate that he has invited you. It is a beautiful house."

Geneviève bit back the scathing retort that rose to her lips.

"I am to see that you have whatever you wish," Odile continued. "Tonight you will dine with the comte, but in his absence you must come to me with your needs."

"In his absence? He has gone?"

"Oh, for the day only. He must ride to the Cul-de-Sac. His plantation is there. It is only a problem with the blacks." The girl's lips curled in disgust as she spoke of the slaves. "A small matter, really. He will return for dinner."

Abruptly, the carriage halted before a row of townhouses. Each of the houses was remarkably tall and narrow, and as delicate and fanciful as though imagined by a child. Their pastel colors enhanced the wooden filigree that embellished the tiny balconies attached to each of their four stories. From the flat roofs, bougainvillea and other flowers Geneviève did not recognize spilled gaily down the walls to form a crown of blossoms for each of the buildings.

At Odile's indication, Geneviève distinguished the one owned by Comte d'Villiers. She scanned its facade, memorizing the position of each door and shuttered window. She had not abandoned her hope of escape. Misunderstanding her interest, Odile spoke with warmth for the first time.

"You have noticed the roof garden." She smiled. "It is lovely, a work of art. Perhaps you will dine there tonight."

You feel the pride of a mistress of the house, Geneviève thought curiously. Yes, Odile, your pride may prove useful.

"I'm sure the garden is splendid, Odile," she responded.

Their brief conversation was interrupted by Samson. As he helped Geneviève from the carriage, she shrank from the network of deep scars across his face. These were not the marks of an accident, but rather the signs of vicious and deliberate punishment. The lash, Geneviève thought. She was aware that this was the popular discipline for a slave in the islands, but never had she seen one so marked.

"Come," Odile called as she led the way into the house. "You have been given a charming room."

Geneviève followed slowly, aware that Samson watched her every step.

"It is pleasing, yes?" Odile turned to ask as they reached the open doorway.

The long, cool room was elegant. Even in her present state



of misery, Geneviève could not deny that. At this hour of the day the room was not shuttered. Sparkling sea light reflected and glittered across the dark polished floors and bathed the white walls with a gentle glow. She breathed in the scent of flowers that suffused the house, drifting in through the windows that overlooked the calm bay below. But she gazed out on the harbor not to admire its beauty, but to search among the ships riding at anchor for the *Liberté*. Be careful of such thoughts, Geneviève, she cautioned herself. There are other matters at hand.

Following her brief enthusiasm, Odile's haughty manner had returned. She curtly instructed Geneviève to prepare herself for the arrival of the Comte d'Villiers. She was to rest and enjoy a light meal. In the late afternoon, Odile would return to style her coiffure. Several gowns in a variety of hues were laid out on the bed for Geneviève's inspection. She was to select the most becoming and submit her choice to Odile for approval. At this indignity, Geneviève's cheeks burned.

After the *cocotte* left her, she quickly tried the door. It opened at her touch. At least she was not locked in her room as she had been at Madame Bourget's. If she could only avoid Samson, she might possibly make her escape and never face Comte d'Villiers this evening. She would bide her time and wait for the heat of the day when the members of the household would be in their chambers rather than abroad in the hallway.

To pass the time, Geneviève turned to the gowns on the bed. She glanced at one of pale peach, delicate as gossamer. Another of a heavy, rich material in green shot through with threads of silver caught her eye. But the most beautiful was fashioned of a silk so fine that the garment seemed to be weightless as Geneviève took it up. Cool against her hands, it was a delicate cornflower blue, hemmed with a deep border in the exact shade of fresh butter. If I'm fortunate, the girl thought, I'll have no need of these, beautiful as they are.

Geneviève's attempt to talk with the servant who brought her meal of spicy chowder and wine came to nothing. The girl seemed terrified and escaped as quickly as her duties permitted. When she had left, Geneviève waited tensely for quiet to descend on the house. Judging that everyone should be resting, she slipped through the hall and down the stairs to a side door she had noticed earlier. As she reached the door,

she felt an instinctive discomfort. She knew that she was being watched. Thinking that Samson had discovered her, she swung around to face the arrogant figure of Comte d'Villiers.

"Of course it's locked, Geneviève." He smiled. She fought the overpowering fear his appearance had caused.

"How quickly you tire of my hospitality. My guests are generally more enthusiastic."

"Comte d'Villiers, I am not your guest," she retorted.

"As you wish." He shrugged. "For you, it would be more pleasant to assume that you are my guest. But if you prefer another role . . . my pleasure in you won't be lessened."

At his insinuation, Geneviève felt the blood drain from her face.

"You look pale," the comte remarked. "Perhaps you should return to your room. But, first, I must show my appreciation of your beauty. We were somewhat restricted in our first meeting, I remember."

Before Geneviève could retreat, he was beside her, the strength of his fingers biting into the soft flesh of her shoulder. Disgusted by his touch, she attempted to rake his face with her nails, only to have her hand pinioned behind her back as he drew her to him. His mouth came down on hers and his teeth bit into her lips. She wrenched her head aside, but her struggle only excited him further, causing him to hold her so tightly that her body ached from the pressure. Slowly, his harsh grip eased, becoming a caress that moved hungrily over her body; then he released her. His eyes glittered with pleasure and desire as he watched her rearrange her dress with a trembling hand.

"You are an excellent amusement, Geneviève," he said. "Once you've known the pleasure of my bed, you will come to me willingly and will no longer interest me. But for now, you are worthy of the closest attention. Ah, but you wished to retire, yes?" he asked, mocking her with a low bow.

Geneviève's eyes were filled with hatred as she swept past him to the stairway.

The scalding heat of the sun over Port-au-Prince had subsided. In the balmy dusk, a cooling breeze left a taste of salt on Geneviève's lips. She had watched the brilliant jade of the sea turn to azure as the sun burned out over the harbor. For her, the changing hues of the sea served only to mark the

passing hours, bringing her appointment with her host ever closer. Her skin was still cool and fragrant from her bath, but her hands felt icy as she smoothed the blue silk of her gown.

The faint sound of a door closing somewhere in the house caused her body to tremble. Following her meeting with d'Villiers, her desperate plans for escape had given way to a cool, methodical consideration of the man. His arrogance and his expectation that she would resist him could be his undoing, if she could find the courage to use them. She had no fear that she would respond to him, but to resist fighting him would be difficult. Still, resist she would. Even d'Villiers could find no stimulant in a totally passive body. A thin smile found its way to Geneviève's mouth. He might hold her body captive, but it still belonged to her. He would never possess her.

"You will come, Geneviève." Odile's cold voice broke her reverie. "I can see," the girl continued as she scrutinized Geneviève, "that you will please him—for a while."

Odile's insolence failed to stir Geneviève. Her better judgment admonished her that this was not the enemy.

"Follow me," Odile said.

Geneviève could not suppress a smile as she followed the girl's slim, rigid back down the hall. Obviously, her relationship with the comte was more intimate than that of a mere *cocotte*. Odile was too flagrantly displaying the prickling jealousy of one not chosen to warm the master's bed. If only I could grant your wish, Odile, and be gone, Geneviève thought, as they mounted the stairway to the roof garden.

She was not prepared for the cloying atmosphere of the garden. The warm, heavy sea air enveloped her, and the oppressive fragrance of the many flowering trees and shrubs made breathing difficult. Violent color assaulted Geneviève's eyes from every corner. Huge, moisture-laden blossoms in yellow, lavender and red hung from the contorted vines and potted trees of this cultivated jungle.

Stifled by the moist sweetness, Geneviève moved to the low wall surrounding the garden, seeking a cool breeze. Below, the purple shadows of palm trees circled the dark crescent of the harbor. Cookfires flickered on the hill above the water as the free blacks of Port-au-Prince prepared their evening meal. The wailing, mournful call blown on a conch shell was answered by the throbbing tones of a drum somewhere high in the mountains. Geneviève shuddered. A piercing scream

from the hill died quickly into throaty laughter, then was lost in animal noises and laughter from the darkness below.

"You shouldn't be alarmed, Geneviève. They're only taking their pleasures," Comte d'Villiers murmured, his mouth close against her ear.

Geneviève stiffened as she felt his hands grip her waist. The odor of cognac was heavy on his breath. She pushed his hands away and turned to search his face. The mocking eyes glowed with a dangerous light and his face was florid from the potent brandy. Geneviève was certain that the drink would make this cunning man an even more savage adversary.

"We'll dine now, Geneviève," he announced.

At d'Villiers' words, several servants appeared from the shadows, with laden silver trays. Geneviève was mortified to think that they had witnessed the comte's handling of her. But their fearful manner and downcast eyes suggested their only concern in this odious household was their own survival.

The small mahogany dining table was covered with an incredible excess of rich courses as was the custom of the island gentry. *Langouste*, fried plantains, succulent pork roasted in banana leaves, a thick, sweet bisque of cream and crab meat, and the delicate flesh of the mountain dove, encased in a crisp pastry shell, were borne away almost untouched by Geneviève. The finest wines from France accompanied each course. She took small sips from the goblets. The dry, woody taste of the red wine soothed her clenched nerves, but the syrupy, almond dessert wine she put aside after only a taste.

Geneviève had taken only enough wine to relax the fear and revulsion that threatened to paralyze her. Now, her mind felt clear and warm, strong feeling flowed through her.

"Your appetite is small, Geneviève," the comte murmured. "Let's hope this isn't true in all things."

She was not given time to reply. He easily lifted her from her chair. The tendril of a vine caught vainly at her hair as he carried her across the garden and into the darkened stairwell. As he held her against his chest, Geneviève could feel the heat of his body through the fabric of his shirt. But she refused to struggle. Instead, she lay still in his arms, willing her mind to control her body.

With a kick of his boot, the heavy door to d'Villiers' bedchamber swung open. Geneviève caught only a glimpse of the masculine fittings in the room before she was placed on

her feet. A thin sheen of perspiration covered the comte's face. His strong, white teeth gleamed in an insolent smile. When he spoke to her, his voice was thick.

"The gown, Geneviève, is no longer needed." His hand flicked out and slid the thin blue material and chemise from her shoulders. She felt the cool silk slide over her breasts and thighs to the floor.

"You are even better than I expected." His voice was hoarse with hunger. "And I will teach you that this beautiful body is capable of greater pleasures than you could imagine."

The hooded eyes caressed her breasts, dropping to the gentle curve of her belly and the shadow of her womanhood below. Lingered there, his breathing deepened as his gaze moved down the swell of her hips and thighs. Impatiently, he removed his shirt, tossing the garment across a chair.

In the dim light, Geneviève saw the hard muscles of his chest and arms ripple as he removed his boots. He was much larger and stronger than she had realized.

Geneviève's resolve drained away as the Comte d'Villiers approached her. She had never seen a man naked. Of course, there had been Judson Talbot. But that had been different, confusing, not this animal stalking with d'Villiers' arrogant assumption of her delighted surrender. She took a step backward, her gaze on his muscled legs and broad shoulders. He did not seem to see her now and he was already swollen with lust when he reached for her. Holding her against his chest, his hands slid down her back, cupping her buttocks and forcing her into his body. The musky smell of his skin and the cognac he had drunk hung heavily around her. Probing, demanding, he parted her lips with his, and Geneviève felt the warm thrust of his tongue penetrate her mouth. As he lifted her to the bed, his hands slid up her wrists, pressing her arms above her head, his weight forcing her down. A sudden rage filled her as his hands moved down to caress the swell of her breasts. She clenched her teeth, fighting the desire to claw at him with the sharp points of her nails. You must not, you must not, her mind clamored.

An unexpected tremor spread through her limbs as his lips dropped to her breast. Moving gently across her skin, he slowly took her nipple in his mouth. She felt a compelling, hypnotic warmth, and then the sharp pressure of his teeth, then warmth again. A flowing, melting sensation entered her. *Bon Dieu*, is the body so treacherous, she thought as his

mouth moved over her? Dropping lower, his lips burned down the tender flesh of her belly until Geneviève bit back a moan at the shock of new sensation. Then, he was between her knees, pressing her thighs open, filling her. His hands went beneath her hips, pulling her against his hard body, his weight violating her with a harsh rhythm. Fragmented thoughts swirled through Geneviève's mind. Her hatred of this man mingled and clashed with a savage pulsing in her thighs. D'Villiers' body shuddered as a guttural moan escaped his throat. Geneviève bit into the flesh of her lip, willing her body to remain passive. Then he was spent. He was breathing harshly as he lowered himself beside her.

Geneviève allowed him to hold her. This moment of quiet gave her the respite she required to calm her mind. D'Villiers was relaxed now. He leaned over her and she saw that his sardonic smile had returned.

"It was good, yes? You are not the first who had thought to resist. There will be no need to force you again." He laughed, fondling her breast carelessly.

Geneviève forced a look of petulance to her face and stretched lazily. "As you know, comte, I have had little experience. But I had expected far more," she said prettily.

The room became a vacuum of sound. D'Villiers' eyes held hers for what seemed to Geneviève the longest moment of her life. His face darkened and a muscle quivered in his cheek.

"Perhaps, Geneviève, I have underestimated you."

The hooded eyes became hard, black crystals, and Geneviève glimpsed the beast within. At that moment, she knew he could kill her. Then kill me! she raged to herself, matching his fury. If you are not a fool, you will. For this is the smallest part of my revenge.

## Chapter 4

The Comte d'Villiers did not approach Geneviève on the following day. She dined alone and was attended by Odile. Only once did she see her host. She encountered him in the hallway as she retired after dinner. Cold and aloof, he acknowledged her with a mocking bow, but did not detain her. She was elated by his apparent lack of interest, hoping that he had found her unsatisfactory and intended to send her away.

In this lighter frame of mind, Geneviève amused herself by helping Odile ready the townhouse to be closed. D'Villiers had instructed the *cocotte* to prepare for a move to Bel Jardin, his plantation. She was sure that this was further indication that, having amused himself with her, d'Villiers had turned his attention to other matters.

Her spirits were further elevated when Odile delivered a message that the comte would expect her in the salon early the next morning. She was to be dressed in traveling clothes, which Odile would provide. Puzzled, Geneviève questioned the *cocotte* to no avail.

In the morning, when the house was still shuttered, Geneviève was dressed and waiting in the main salon. She tapped her small foot impatiently as the minutes dragged by.

"You are prompt," the comte noted as he strode into the room. "Come, there is much to do."

As suspicion quickly replaced optimism, she felt the old stubbornness rise within her. "Where are you taking me?" she asked warily.

"Tomorrow, we will leave for my estate in the Cul-du-Sac. Before we go, there is a play I wish to see here in Port-au-Prince. You will accompany me, properly dressed. Now come."

Geneviève's green eyes blazed as she followed d'Villiers to the carriage. So, she concluded, you have not relented. You will still keep me like a pet on a leash. Well, you'll find little pleasure in it. That I promise!

The day went by in an exhausting daze of dust and heat as Geneviève was driven from shop to shop in the narrow streets of Port-au-Prince. Each shopkeeper was more fawning than the next as their entourage, headed by the comte with the sulky Odile trailing behind, purchased a fashionable wardrobe. Geneviève was measured, fitted and flattered by dress-makers and cobblers as each scrambled, trembling, to meet the demands of the Comte d'Villiers.

Late in the afternoon, Samson stopped the carriage before a modest shop painted pale pink and trimmed in blue. Frederic Ravenel, the brass sign read. Weary and wishing only to rest, Geneviève stared at the quaint building.

"This is our last errand. Monsieur Ravenel deals in gems. He also serves very fine wine to his best customers. You will be restored, Geneviève," the comte assured her.

The interior of the shop was cool and elegant. Geneviève sank gratefully into a comfortable chair, and accepted the chilled, fruity wine from a silver salver offered by Monsieur Ravenel's servant.

"I wish to see something striking—nothing of an ordinary design," d'Villiers told the small, round-cheeked proprietor.

"For *mademoiselle*?" the man asked.

"Yes," d'Villiers responded.

Idly, Geneviève wondered that cheeks so pale as Monsieur Ravenel's had ever known the searing rays of the tropical sun. She felt an immediate liking for the portly little man. He was courteous, he carried himself with dignity, and his gaze was direct as he addressed his customers.

"Perhaps there are a few pieces," he mused. "One moment, please."



He returned shortly with a tray covered in dove-gray velvet. Speaking softly, he ordered the servant to open a shutter.

"Now, sir," he said, "here are some remarkable pieces. Each is unique, and fit for a true connoisseur."

The comte examined the tray with interest. There were five stones mounted in rich settings, each strung from a heavy chain. There was a ruby as large as a pigeon egg and two emeralds, glowing softly in old silver settings. An unusual necklace of fiery opals, strung with enormous pink pearls, caught d'Villiers' eye for a moment.

"Geneviève?" he said, passing the tray to her.

Glancing uninterestedly at the tray as she took it, Geneviève almost cried out. The fifth jewel was the d'Binet diamond! The great yellow stone was easily the most beautiful of the selection, Geneviève noted with pride. Her eyes welled with tears, and pain caught at her throat as she recalled Guy-Pierre. "I will have it back, uncle," she whispered to herself as she swallowed her tears.

"The diamond is by far the finest. But, perhaps it is too expensive?" she said calmly, as if unaware of the challenge in the question.

Monsieur Ravenel gazed at her with respect. "*Mademoiselle* is correct. It is indeed the finest. But I must mention my concern for the origin of this gem. I take pride in knowing the history of the fine jewels in Saint-Domingue. This one . . ." he paused. "It is a stranger here. Perhaps it has come to us through unhappy circumstances."

Geneviève dropped her chin to conceal the emotions clouding her face. If this kindly man only knew how astute his judgment was!

D'Villiers regarded the proprietor coldly. "Little comes to this island through happy circumstances, *monsieur*. Our pleasure should not be spoiled by that. You wish to have this diamond, Geneviève?"

"Yes, I do," she answered firmly.

"As you wish," the proprietor replied.

"My man will call on you directly as to payment, *monsieur*. We will take the jewel with us when it is wrapped. And another glass of wine while we wait," d'Villiers said.

Geneviève's pulse pounded. It had been easier than she had expected. Her touchstone, her talisman, was hers again.

She would not dwell on the price she was paying for it.

When she had rested and awakened refreshed, Geneviève found that all of her packages had been delivered. Her gowns had been altered to fit perfectly, and were now being pressed by the servants. The other finery d'Villers had purchased was stacked about the room in boxes and parcels of gay colors.

Bathing in the fragrant water Odile had prepared for her, Geneviève thought of the play she would attend, *Tartuffe* by Monsieur Molière. She remembered discussing Molière with Guy-Pierre, who had praised the playwright's frank views and biting wit. But, Geneviève had never seen *Tartuffe*, as the play was considered far too risqué to be staged in Savannah. She dreaded the evening with d'Villiers but was excited by the prospect of the performance and the chance to wear her beloved diamond.

Later, when Geneviève had dressed, even Odile was forced to admire her beauty. The gown the comte had selected for her was of the fine tissue-silk she preferred. White, with tiny cap-sleeves, the design displayed to advantage her gently sculptured shoulders and firm breasts. A sash of vivid green worked with lotus blossoms, tied just beneath her bosom, allowed the folds of the skirt to fall close to her hips. She had chosen silk slippers to match the green sash from among the dozens of pairs d'Villiers had ordered.

Odile fastened a sparkling diamond tiara into Geneviève's curls. The comte, seeing the tiara as he and Geneviève were leaving the shop of Monsieur Ravenel, had bought the lovely creation to complement the diamond pendant. Designed with white and yellow diamonds to resemble a spray of flowers with golden stems, the piece had belonged to a member of the royal family of France.

Seated at her dressing table as Odile completed her coiffure, Geneviève was startled when the comte strode into her room.

"Stand up, Geneviève," he commanded. "I wish to see how you look."

For a moment, Geneviève's hand closed around the d'Binet diamond. Her small, stubborn chin lifted. "Comte," she suggested, deliberately ignoring his demand, "won't you sit down? I'd like to thank you for the lovely jewel."

Odile paled at the subtle insult and d'Villiers' face flushed with anger. Then his guttural laughter filled the room.

"Perhaps I should accept, *mademoiselle*. I've never attended a woman at her dressing table. But I will await you in the salon."

"You should not take such chances," warned Odile after his departure. "You have never seen him in anger."

Oh, but I have, she thought wryly. Aloud, she ventured, "What more could he do to me, Odile? Would he treat me as he treats his blacks so that my body trembles and I fear to meet his eye? He will have to kill me first."

"You mustn't speak so," Odile cautioned.

"Never mind, Odile. I'm not a fool. I will be careful."

Geneviève was delighted with the wicked performance of *Tartuffe*. She could imagine how much her worldly uncle must have enjoyed a similar evening. But she noticed that the majority of the audience frankly ignored the play in favor of flirtatious and blatantly sensual behavior. Notes were passed throughout the performance to establish meetings, and couples left frequently to giggle and whisper in the darkened recesses of the theater.

The comte, noting Geneviève's puzzled expression, leaned close to her. "This is a free society, Geneviève. There is little learning in Saint-Domingue. Wealth is the only god, and flesh the only pursuit. The true drama tonight will appear not on the stage but in the audience." There was amusement in his eyes.

When intermission was announced, Geneviève hoped briefly that she might elude d'Villiers in the crowd. But he took her arm in a firm grasp as they rose. On leaving their seats, they were surrounded by planters, acquaintances of the comte who sought an introduction to Geneviève.

Geneviève was well aware that she was not as well-received by the ladies present. Their eyes followed her with increasing hostility. She returned their stares with curiosity. Never had she seen such revealing clothes, such displays of bosom. It seemed that here suggestive behavior was quite acceptable, indeed, expected.

"Geneviève. May I present Amalie Dubose."

At the comte's words, Geneviève turned and saw a voluptuous, dark-haired woman clinging to his arm. Her dress was

a rich, deep saffron-yellow, cut low to flaunt a generous cleavage and a dazzling choker of topaz and diamonds.

"Good evening, Madame Dubose. What is your opinion of Monsieur Molière?" Geneviève asked pleasantly.

The woman's pretty face looked puzzled. "I have not made his acquaintance, *mademoiselle*," she said nonchalantly, fluffing her hair.

Geneviève looked closely at the woman, thinking perhaps she was dim-witted.

The Comte d'Villiers laughed heartily at this exchange. "Geneviève," he said, "had you asked Amalie her opinion of the young rake Adolphe Bedel, and how she found him while her husband visits the Cul-de-Sac, she would be filled with opinions, yes, Amalie?"

"Oh, you are wicked, *monsieur*," Amalie giggled, pressing against the comte. "But, then, you have always been so. And of late, you are negligent as well. Do I bore you?" she pouted.

"Indeed you do, Amalie. We exhausted each other's charms long ago," the comte responded.

"Don't be too certain. Experience will always better innocence—eventually," the woman said pointedly, staring at Geneviève. "*Au revoir, monsieur*." She drifted away through the crowd, her heavy perfume trailing in her wake.

Geneviève was intrigued. "And her husband?" she asked d'Villiers.

"Her husband is well-occupied with a beautiful octoroon. Amalie never visits the plantation. She is left in Port-au-Prince to amuse herself—which she manages to do very well."

Suddenly aware that the sensual atmosphere and talk of assignations had aroused d'Villiers, Geneviève became cautious. As they traveled home in the carriage, she was aware that his half-closed eyes never left her.

Miserably she lay in her bed, throughout the night expecting his footsteps in the hallway. But he did not come. When the first cock crowed somewhere in the city, she fell into a fitful sleep.

It seemed to Geneviève that she had only just closed her eyes, when the servant brought her breakfast tray. Odile was everywhere, urging her to eat, bathe and dress for the journey to Bel Jardin.

Weary as she felt, Geneviève experienced a flash of excitement. She had pried from Odile the information that d'Villiers felt it would be easier and safer to keep her at Bel Jardin. The isolation of the plantation and the distance of neighbors in the Cul-de-Sac would make escape more difficult. Geneviève felt differently. In the townhouse, she was surrounded by servants. Escape was impossible *here*. But given a bit of freedom and privacy—well, she would see.

The comte had ridden on ahead, and Samson would drive Odile and Geneviève in the carriage. The house servants would follow in two wagons filled with the women's trunks. At last they were ready to depart and the caravan jolted down the street at a sedate pace. For once, there was a light mood among the household. Everyone except the brooding Samson seemed to feel the pleasure of the journey.

The morning passed happily for Geneviève. Until now, she had seen little of the countryside and was fascinated with the huge sugar refineries and the looming gates that led to the homes of the industry's barons. One could not travel the Cul-de-Sac Road without being aware of Saint-Domingue's dependence on sugar. Geneviève wondered at the fragile economy, knowing how quickly this house of cards would collapse if the market for sugar shifted. In trying to discuss this with Odile, she found the *cocotte* had no understanding and less interest in the subject.

But Odile was willing to identify the trees and shrubs that they passed. This soon became a game, with Odile chanting calabash, agave, satinwood, star apple, and Geneviève pointing to another of the same variety.

When they reached the foot of the mountains, Samson drew the carriage into the shade of a tree, which Geneviève laughingly identified. From a woven basket, Odile produced sweet crab cakes and mango and cool white wine. The women ate in the shade of the carriage as Samson joined the other servants under the trees.

As the carriage climbed into the mountains, the trees pressed closer to the road. Gently arched above the travelers, the thick vegetation cut off the sun to form a dim, fragrant tunnel. Now Geneviève could hear the calls of birds and see an occasional flash of brilliant plumage. The squawk of irate parrots and the sweet song of the musician bird reached her. Through gaps in the forest, she could look down into the

valleys where flocks of doves wheeled above the treetops. For the first time since arriving in Saint-Domingue, she was happy.

Too soon, the carriage descended to the Cul-de-Sac Plain. As far across as Geneviève could see, canestalks blanketed the flat, fertile land.

"These are the fields of Bel Jardin," Odile said, pointing to both sides of the road. "We shall arrive there soon."

As the carriage rounded a bend in the road, Geneviève could see the plantation's huge arched entrance gate looming in the distance. Her pleasant mood evaporated. With the first clip-clop of the horses' hooves on the herringbone brick of the drive, a feeling of discomfort came over her. She glanced back at the house servants, who had been laughing and chattering to each other. But silence had fallen on the two wagons. Even Odile was subdued.

They rolled slowly between the white fluted columns that lined the drive. Off to one side, Geneviève noticed a number of slaves toiling in the cane fields. They did not look up as the carriage passed by, yet Geneviève knew they were aware of its progress.

Samson pulled the horses to a stop before the massive white structure that was Bel Jardin. The house was three stories high, of white stuccoed brick, with steps sweeping up to the second-story entrance door. To each side of the house, tall, green hedges surrounded formal gardens dotted with marble statues of the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. To the right, above the hedges, Geneviève could see the roof of what appeared to be a large stable.

"Where do the slaves live?" Geneviève asked Odile.

"Behind the house there is an orchard. Just beyond it begin the quarters." Odile told her.

Several servants approached the carriage to assist the women. They, too, moved quietly. They bowed to Odile and Geneviève, but did not speak as they went about their chores.

"What a wretched, silent place this is," Geneviève said in disgust.

Odile's eyes widened, and she placed her finger to her lips as she was helped from the carriage. "I must speak to the servants," she said. "You will be shown your room."

The interior of the house could have been mistaken for that of a French palace. Fluted marble columns reached to the

recessed, half-domed ceiling, which was embellished with a frieze of rosettes and acanthus. Fine mahogany paneling lined the walls. The ornately carved furnishings were of rosewood and mahogany worked by the finest cabinetmakers of France. Splendid plush rugs matching the yellows and golds of the draperies softened the shining parquet floors. Before a pair of long French windows stood a tall, golden cage filled with twittering finches in rainbow hues.

The servant opened the door to her bedchamber. Geneviève would have been delighted had the room been anywhere other than in d'Villiers' home. Hues of rose and cream had been used to soften the high ceilings and create a feeling of intimacy. A slender bedstead of fine, dark wood was draped with heavy cream lace held at each side by a golden rosette. On the dressing table, a toilet set of beaten gold was laid out in readiness. Crystal bottles containing every possible scent awaited Geneviève's pleasure. A satin comforter in deep rose covered the bed and matched the folds of lace and silk at the windows. Geneviève was drawn to the beauty of a carved, rosewood writing desk. The mellow wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, was smooth beneath her fingers. A large needlepoint tapestry of a pastoral scene also caught her eye.

"You may go now." She smiled to the servant. "I have all that I need."

When the woman had gone, Geneviève approached the tapestry and touched it gingerly. What was it that disturbed her about it? Of course, the girl thought. It was out of proportion to the other furnishings, reaching from above her head to the floor. A frown creased her brow as she threw aside the hanging to discover a door behind it. She leaned her weight against the panel. It was latched, but not from her side of the door. There was no fastening. Geneviève allowed the tapestry to drop back into place. Did the comte's room lie beyond the locked door? With this thought, she might have been in a hovel for all the interest she now felt in the gorgeous rooms.

That afternoon, as Geneviève rested, the comte entered her room unannounced. The girl started from her bed.

"No," he said waving her back. "I will be brief, I have little time. You are no longer confined to your room. You'll have

access to the entire house. But if you walk the grounds, Odile must be with you. You may choose a mount from the stable, but when you ride you'll be accompanied by a groom at all times."

"I would prefer to ride with Odile," Geneviève responded.

"I am sure," d'Villiers said mockingly. "But you will ride with a groom. That is all." He paused. "Geneviève, if you do not obey, you'll regret it." Then he was gone as quietly as he had come.

Geneviève quickly donned her riding habit and hurried from her room, calling for Odile. The prospect of riding again with the sun on her face was delightful. And what groom could outride her? Geneviève chuckled. How foolish d'Villiers was!

In the stable, the women walked the rows of stalls, as Geneviève examined bays, chestnuts, blacks and a dapple-gray stallion, before choosing Lizette, a beautiful fawn mare with a delicate face and large, intelligent eyes. Odile watched as Geneviève put the mare through her paces in the stableyard.

"You ride well, *mademoiselle*," she acknowledged as Geneviève spun the mare over to her. "Possibly, you ride more skillfully than the groom who will escort you. *Attendez*, Geneviève," the girl said, her voice a whisper. "Should your groom ever return without you, he will most certainly be killed. I have no love for the blacks, but this you should know."

Horried, Geneviève looked down into Odile's cold, perfect face and knew she spoke the truth. She also realized that this would not be her means of escape, and that d'Villiers knew that as well.

That night, Geneviève's sleep was fitful, and plagued with terrifying dreams in which she was constantly pursued. Finally, she tried to wake up, to avoid the misery of further nightmares. Through half-open eyes, she saw the sun rise. Suddenly, a hoarse, piercing scream jolted her awake. Leaping from the bed, she caught the lace of her nightdress on the handle of a chest. Jerking it loose impatiently, she heard the fabric rip as she ran to the window.

When she threw back the shutters, Geneviève heard another scream from the stableyard. But this one subsided to a whimper, like that of a dying animal. Looking down, she saw



a man suspended by his wrists from the heavy beam across the stable door. His naked back was a tortured mass of blood and flesh, torn by the heavy whip gripped in d'Villiers' hand. While she watched, d'Villiers wielded the whip again, slashing down at the man's body with all of his strength. Geneviève began to tremble as another scream rent the morning air. Rage and anguish gripped her as she ran down the long hall, the hem of her nightdress trailing behind her. She was dizzy from the blood pounding in her head, but she slowed her pace only to wrench the comte's riding crop from its rack on the wall.

Odile burst from her room as Geneviève ran past. "No, Geneviève, he will kill you! Go back to your room." Odile's eyes were wide with terror.

"Why is he whipping that slave, Odile? Why? Tell me," she demanded, shaking the girl by her shoulders.

"He dropped your trunk," Odile said fearfully. "It burst and your gowns were soiled."

The color drained from Geneviève's face. As she whirled around, Odile grasped her arm to stop her, but she threw off the *cocotte* and raced through the door.

She was aware only of the dusty earth under her bare feet, and the rage pounding in her temples as she brought the crop down hard on d'Villiers' back.

"You animal!" she screamed, the tears blurring her sight. "Let him alone. You will kill him."

D'Villiers turned, and for an instant before his blow reached her, she saw the look of ardent pleasure in his eyes. He is insane, she thought. A hot pain brought points of light before her eyes; then darkness descended.

Geneviève woke to a throbbing headache and a room that swirled around her. Odile's voice penetrated the haze. "Be very still, *mademoiselle*." She pressed a cool, herb-soaked cloth to Geneviève's temples. "This potion is a restorative. The pain will be better soon."

"Odile," she whispered, "the slave?"

The *cocotte* dropped her eyes and was silent.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Geneviève asked.

Odile nodded. "Yes."

Geneviève felt nausea and pain rise in her throat. Odile held a basin for her until she had finished, then bathed her

head again with the healing potion. The *cocotte* frowned at the unnatural pallor of her patient's face, which contrasted sharply with the livid bruise d'Villiers had inflicted. Had she noticed the determined set to the small, stubborn chin, she would have been even more concerned. A strange, grudging understanding had developed between the two women, and Odile continued to sit beside Geneviève's bed far into the night.

Several hours before sunrise, the *cocotte* was satisfied with Geneviève's improvement. Her color was normal, and though her face was terribly swollen, she was resting well. Odile slipped back to her room for a few hours' sleep.

When she was sure that Odile was gone, Geneviève threw off the covers, edged into a sitting position and attempted to stand. She felt stronger now, but with her first step, the floor swayed. Breathing deeply, she continued to walk slowly around the room until she felt herself again.

Yes, it could be done, she was sure. But, she knew she must be quick before the household began to stir. If she were to escape, it could only be now, when she was thought to be injured and helpless.

Geneviève did not take the time to don her elaborate riding habit but slipped into a simple dress and soft leather slippers. She paused outside her door, willing the floorboards to silence.

She had only one regret—that she could not take the d'Binet diamond. The comte kept the stone locked away somewhere in the house. She would have to leave without it.

Moving lightly, she reached the heavy main door of the house. Holding her breath, she reached for the knob. To her relief, the door swung open.

Like a small, pale ghost, she crossed the stableyard. At Lizette's stall, she paused a moment to breathe the sweet, clean odor of hay. Lizette nickered softly, extending her velvet muzzle in hopes of a treat. She unhooked the mare's bridle from its place by the door and slid into the stall. Lizette tossed her head with excitement. Geneviève crooned to her as she slipped the bit into the horse's mouth. Reaching between her knees, she grasped the hem of her skirt, pulled it up quickly and tucked it securely into the belt at her waist as she had seen slave women do when they rode. She laced her fingers through Lizette's mane and pulled herself onto the

mare's back. The dizziness returned, but passed less slowly this time. Leaning low across the horse's neck, Geneviève reached down and opened the door. She guided the mare out into the long, dark corridor, then reined her in to plan her escape. She knew that headlong flight, which was her inclination, would only draw attention. Instead, she would walk the mare, skirting the cane fields and avoiding the drive until she could reach the main road, far from Bel Jardin. Only then would speed be valuable. She might be forced into days of hiding if d'Villiers determined to pursue her.

"Well, we shall try, Lizette," she said. She patted the mare and urged her forward with her knees. The stable was alive with moving shadows and the noises of horses shifting in the deep hay. Geneviève glanced anxiously around her but saw nothing as the mare picked her way past the dark stalls.

Suddenly, she was falling. She gripped the horse with her hands and knees to maintain her balance, but an iron grip on her waist was pulling her down. Frightened, Lizette reared, and Geneviève was jerked backward. She could smell the stale odor of sweat and hear heavy breathing, as she was held with crushing pressure against a man's chest. Terrified now, the girl clamped her teeth into the arm of the man who held her. For a moment, his hold loosened and Geneviève twisted around to see Samson's face contorted with pain. She aimed her foot at his legs, hoping to strike the vulnerable shins. An answering grunt told her she had found her mark but he simply shifted his grip, increasing her pain until the stable began to swim before her. He dragged her down the corridor, but she could only scratch weakly at his chest.

"Master!" he roared as he carried her along. "Master!"

As they reached the yard, Geneviève went limp. The terrible pain in her head had returned, and she knew it was useless to spend herself fighting the powerful Samson.

"Put me down, Samson," she said, her voice tired.

"You will no run?" He formed the words slowly. "Master say you no run."

"I will not run. Put me down."

Geneviève staggered with pain and exhaustion as her feet touched the ground.

"You've decided to abuse my generosity, I see." The comte's voice seemed very distant as she swayed on her feet. "You are a fool, Geneviève. My patience grows short and I shall risk no further escape. Samson, lock her in her room."

Geneviève fell onto her bed, sobs racking her bruised body. Helpless rage filled her, and with a surge of frustration, she sank her teeth into the satin comforter. The heavy key rattled in the lock, as Samson latched the door against her last hope of freedom.

## Chapter 5

The *Liberté* arrived off the sandbanks of Charleston and hove-to in view of Folly Island. Judson preferred to avoid taking on a pilot, but the influence of the tides and the constantly shifting sands of the Charleston bar made him cautious. By the time the pilot had guided them in, it was late afternoon and a thunderstorm threatened. Where they had expected a sleepy harbor, they found a dockside bustling with activity. They were forced to anchor in the river until room could be made for them alongside the quay.

Judson and André waited out the storm aboard ship, then rowed immediately ashore. The sun was out again when they climbed onto the wharf, causing steam to rise visibly from the hot, wet planks. By the time they located the factor's office, their sweat-stained clothes were further drenched from the intense humidity. After quoting them a ridiculously low price for their cargo, the factor explained that three ships had recently disgorged a large shipment of rum from Jamaica and the market was glutted. To unload at the current price would mean that their trip had been wasted.

Judson fumed and berated himself, citing the luckless fog and Madame Bourget's machinations. Back in his cabin, he calmed himself with a hefty glass of brandy and a chart of the southern coast. Of course, there was nothing left to do but depart immediately for Savannah. It was nearby, and time

was of the utmost importance if he was to return to France before the hurricane season in the Atlantic. He instructed André to weigh anchor at once.

Strangely, it had been his original desire to go to Savannah. He had chosen Charleston for its larger size and more dependable market. But fate was now dictating his decision. For years, he had planned to return to the city of his youthful adventures. Perhaps he could locate his friends, Seth and Genny, as he had promised to do, and thank them properly for their help rendered during that desperate time. If only he knew their last names.

Savannah had changed quite a bit. Still, the city was not large, and he found the house easily. A picture of it was etched in his memory: the cellar, the sound of cannon, the excitement mixed with fear, and Seth and Genny in the midst of it all. Ah, Genny. He had never seen another girl like her. What would she be like now? It was with great anticipation that he cleared his throat and knocked upon the door. Within a moment, it was opened by a formidable black woman.

"Is Genny at home?"

She gazed at him curiously. It was an odd request, but by his looks he was a gentleman. "There's no Genny here," she said.

"But I was in this house ten years ago, during the war, and I met a young girl named Genny, and her friend Seth."

"This is the home of Major Maxwell," insisted the woman, drawing back her shoulders. "I don't know no Genny or no Seth."

This was not proving to be an easy task, Judson thought, as he sat in a loud River Street tavern. He toyed with his plate of stew and bread, then pushed it aside. His stomach felt jittery and he tried to calm it with a glass of wine. Surely, it wasn't the disappointment of not finding the girl? He would find her eventually, with a little more effort. But his thoughts were also on returning to Saint-Domingue. The entire episode with Madame Bourget's young protégée was unfathomable to him. He had had many women before this Geneviève. Yet, her image stayed with him.

Angrily pushing back his chair, he told himself sternly that there was money to be made. His ship was loaded with lumber, resin and vegetables on their way to spoiling, and he

must set sail for Saint-Domingue immediately. Savannah and Genny would have to wait.

With his prices secured, Judson left André in charge of unloading the cargo and taking on sugar for the return to France. At Madame Bourget's, however, he was not received graciously. Margrit's face fell when she met him at the door. She appeared, in fact, to be frightened. She led him quickly past the open doors of the front salon, which, at only an hour past noon, were already spilling over with drunken revelers. He caught a glimpse of Madame Bourget presiding at the gambling table upon which one guest appeared, inconveniently, to be sleeping.

Margrit ushered him into the small salon from which she had to evict a hostile and disheveled couple. Nothing more than a whorehouse, Judson thought. The idea of Geneviève living in this place filled him with disgust. When Madame Bourget entered, he was drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"Captain! What a pleasure to have you return so soon."

Judson stood to take her hand and kiss it stiffly. "The pleasure is mine, *madame*."

"Indeed, you surprised me, captain. I hadn't expected you to make the passage so quickly."

Judson watched her settle nervously into her chair and wondered why she was talking such nonsense. "You flatter my skills at sea, *madame*. In fact, I was delayed in Charleston and was forced to go to Savannah to deliver my cargo."

Her eyes narrowed. "Really, captain? And how did you find Savannah? Is it as backward as I've heard?"

"It was hot, as are all towns in this latitude. But, let me explain why I've come. I want to talk about Geneviève."

"Geneviève? Oh, yes, the young girl I introduced to you. Well, you have no need to worry about her any longer. I've settled her quite nicely with another gentleman," she said, smiling and taking a drink from the tray Margrit offered.

Judson waved Margrit away. "Settled her! My dear woman, you said she would remain with you until I returned. I cannot believe you've *given* her—as you put it—to someone else."

"Captain, you surprise me again. From the way you spoke at our last meeting, I thought you wanted to be rid of the

responsibility for her. I've done the best for her, captain. Surely, you must see that?"

"I see nothing. Who is this 'gentleman'? What has he to offer her?" Judson was leaning forward, gripping the arms of his chair. "And did you send her to him under the same guise as you sent her to me?"

The woman held by his intense gaze was obviously disturbed. "Calm yourself, captain. I . . . I had no idea . . ."

"You had every idea in the world, *madame*. I suspect you know much more than you let on."

"But there are many more girls. Girls just as fetching as Geneviève. You may have your choice, as you well know."

Judson grabbed her wrist in his anger. "*Madame*, if you continue to be coy with me, I'll be forced to try something else."

Margrit stepped forward, waiting for instructions. Madame Bourget, however, was unruffled when she spoke. "You're hurting me, captain. Release me and we'll talk seriously."

Judson released her and stood quickly to take a drink from the tray Margrit was still holding. As he walked to the window, he heard Margrit being dismissed. Turning, he saw Madame Bourget regain her composure. She took a deep draught from her glass and touched a napkin lightly to her lips.

"Now, Judson Talbot, I will confess."

She told him how, soon after he had sailed, Geneviève had come to the attention of a gentleman visitor to the salon. How, upon seeing her, he was smitten. There was no putting him off; he had to have her. Although promised to Judson, the girl would go with him because the gentleman in question was one of the most powerful men in the entire colony of Saint-Domingue. He had the power of the government on his side. Had she refused him Geneviève, she would have been forced to leave the island.

"Who is this 'gentleman'?"

"He is the Comte d'Villiers. If you know anything of this island, you know the truth of what I've told you."

"And your opinion of him? How will she fare with him?"

"He's not only the most powerful man in Saint-Domingue, he's also the most wealthy. If he chooses, he can provide her with anything she could possibly desire."

"If he chooses."



"You must see my dilemma and relent. If not, there can only be grave problems."

"I've had my share of grave problems, *madame*, and I've managed quite well so far."

It was mid-morning when Judson passed through the massive, arched entrance gates of Bel Jardin. He rode slowly up the brick drive, which was swept immaculately clean of debris. There was something sinister about the perfectly manicured grounds, the lonely single columns lining the drive, the eerie silence of an ostensibly active plantation. The unmoving sea of cane in the distance seemed like the walls of a prison. Ahead, he saw the imposing house. Somewhere, shuttered inside, was Geneviève. Six men were riding toward him from the house. They reined in when they met him.

"You are a stranger to me, *monsieur*. Do you have business at Bel Jardin?"

Judson knew who it was at once. There could be no mistaking his dandy clothes and haughty manner. "Am I speaking to the Comte d'Villiers?"

"You are. And who are you?"

"I have recently arrived from France, comte, to settle in Saint-Domingue. Madame Bourget directed me to you as the man most knowledgeable in the plantation business. I hope to be advised by you in certain matters. Judson Talbot, at your service."

The comte smiled. "You have been well-advised already, Monsieur Talbot. If you care to ride with us, I will show you some of the daily aspects of plantation life that are seldom discussed in France."

"I would be privileged, comte."

The Comte d'Villiers took the lead, leaving the drive and thundering indiscriminately through beds of flowers, destroying many hours of artistic gardening. Judson kept pace with the others as they entered the cane fields, moving single file along one of the narrow, now dry, irrigation ditches. They rode for over a mile in the fertile tunnel of green stalks and emerged into a dry, fallow area. The comte galloped ahead, leaving the others washed in a cloud of dust. Abruptly, the terrain turned green again, and they drew up into a grove of tall, thickly leaved oak trees.

Waiting for them in the shade was a silent group of about fifty slaves. As d'Villiers dismounted, one of the blacks

quickly produced a chair for him and placed it under the largest of the trees. The comte motioned for Judson to join him.

"This, *monsieur*, is a part of plantation life that becomes very tiresome and time-consuming. What you are about to see may be harsh to your eyes, but without it our system here would soon fail."

There was a fire burning in between Judson and the gathering of slaves. A small group of blacks, nine men and a woman, huddled together near the fire, separated from the others. He noticed for the first time that their hands were bound behind them.

"There was a ceremony last night. Voodoo. Strictly forbidden. One of my spies reported that there were ten participants."

"These are the ten?"

"Alas, *monsieur*, it makes no difference. There were ten participants and ten will be punished. It is the only thing they understand. If they learn that there will always be indiscriminate retribution, perhaps they will impose their own restrictions."

"How are they to be punished?"

"That you will see soon enough." The comte then nodded to a huge, frightened slave, who began to shove the bound men until they stood in a line facing the crowd. He instructed them to strip and then kicked each behind the knees, forcing them to kneel. He returned to the fire, where he withdrew an iron rod. It glowed bright orange at the heated end.

Judson gasped. "You're going to *brand* them?"

"Of course," he answered calmly. "This is the least of our punishments."

"This isn't punishment, but torture! Such behavior is expressly forbidden by the *Code Noir*."

The Comte d'Villiers looked at him in amazement. "You have much to learn, Monsieur Talbot. The *Code Noir* is for France, for those poor souls with 'sensibilities.' Ah, yes, and may I remind you that the *Code* also instructs us to convert these people to Christianity? So, you see, this will make them all the more likely to forget their ridiculous ceremonies."

Judson had only one political attachment. He was a member, along with Lafayette, Robespierre and many other French humanists, of the *Amis des Noirs*. It was a newly-formed society dedicated to the complete abolition of Negro

slavery in all the French colonies, a logical outcome of the burgeoning movements favoring liberty and equality that were surfacing with increasing vigor in the mother country—movements to which the white planters of Saint-Domingue were violently opposed. The first tactic of the *Amis des Noirs* was to regain the rights of slaves, which were originally granted to them by the *Code Noir* in 1685.

Judson was incensed by this blatant miscarriage of justice. Yet, if he tried to stop it, his plan to rescue Geneviève would be put in jeopardy. And, now, her rescue seemed all the more important. If this was the way d'Villiers treated his slaves, to what horrors had he been subjecting her? He watched, frustrated and helpless.

There was an uncanny silence as the torture began. It was done slowly. The rod was returned to the fire each time before being pressed twice onto the back of each man, forming a crude X. There were no protests from the victims, only the sound of searing human flesh. Judson felt sick.

"It is unfortunate that these brands don't show up well on black skins," laughed d'Villiers. "They will now be paraded through the fields for all to see. Now, we must deal with the woman."

Still bound and clothed, she was brought forward.

"This one has committed a much graver offence," he said. "She was found with amulets in her possession. She is, no doubt, a *mambo*, a priestess of their voodoo cult. Her punishment will be more interesting." He turned to look into Judson's eyes. "She will have boiling wax poured into her ears. Then she will be staked to the ground in the swamp where she'll be able to lie and rest from her pain. Of course," he lifted his hands in mock pity, "if the crocodiles come, *c'est la vie*."

"You intend to kill her then," Judson stated calmly, his hand resting on the silver and ebony grip of his sword.

D'Villiers said nothing, but his smile confirmed Judson's statement.

"Bring her close, comte, if you will. I've never seen a priestess."

"So, you're beginning to show an interest, my friend. Bring the ugly one here," he commanded, pleased with himself.

She was thin, almost to the point of emaciation. A dirty rag was tied tightly over her hair so that the sharp features of her face were even more prominent. Her face showed no fear. It

was impassive except for her dark, smoke-stained eyes, flickering with the slightest trace of triumph. As if she thought that d'Villiers was not going to kill her but to set her free.

The comte rattled on. "These people are heathens, they have no religion. Their ceremonies are merely an excuse to dance insanely to drums and plot against us. They are an abomination to God and to our way of life. Don't you agree?"

As his hand inched carefully toward his pistol, Judson wondered what d'Villiers knew of God. He alone stood near the comte, and the woman would conceal his movements briefly from the men busy at the fire.

The Comte d'Villiers was savoring the sight of his helpless victim. He was puzzled when he saw her smile. Then he heard the pistol cock near his ear and the pressure of the cold barrel on his neck.

Judson motioned for the woman to turn around. When she did, he quickly sliced her bonds with his sword. Massaging the blood back into her hands, she followed his silent instructions to gather the horses.

When the others saw what was happening, there was a great hissing and popping as the men by the fire spilled the boiling wax. No one dared to move. No one could believe that the Comte d'Villiers had been defied, least of all the comte himself.

Nudging him to a standing position, Judson maneuvered him skillfully over to the horses. "We are going to ride out of here, comte. Tell your people to do nothing to stop us, or you will cease to be their master. You will be dead, you see."

"Please!" he shouted. "No one must move. This man is insane. He will kill me in a moment. I will ride with him. . . ." Then, turning to Judson, "To where, *monsieur*?"

"To see another aspect of plantation life, comte."

When they were several miles from the oak grove, Judson ordered a halt by a lone palm tree. The woman had ridden well, leading the extra horses. She remained on her horse when the two men dismounted.

"You have been kind enough to entertain me this morning," Judson told the comte, "and to instruct me in the ways of rich white planters. For this, I owe you much. However, I have more important business elsewhere and I must leave you now."

The Comte d'Villiers noticeably relaxed at these words.

The sparkle returned to his eyes as he began to plan his revenge. This man, Talbot, is exceedingly stupid, he thought.

"But first," Judson continued, "I will repay you in kind by teaching you some of the things I know. You will please remove your clothes."

D'Villiers' triumphant mood was suddenly shattered, as he realized that his humiliation was not over. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean exactly what I say, comte. And please do it quickly. I don't have all day to spend with you."

Rage colored d'Villiers' face as he disrobed under the threat of the pistol. With his other hand, Judson carefully removed the reins from one of the horses. He positioned the back of the fuming man against the trunk of the palm and tied him securely with the leather.

"What is the point of having me naked? And in front of that witch?" D'Villiers indicated the slave woman with a toss of his head.

"So that you and she—and anyone else who comes along—may see your true self."

"You will die for this, Talbot," threatened d'Villiers, his voice uneven.

"Wait, comte. Save your worst threats until I've finished with you." Judson withdrew his sword and placed its tip against d'Villiers' forehead.

"What do you intend to do?" he shouted.

"You have the reputation of being a gentleman, but today I've been privy to your baser nature. You are two-faced, comte, and I want to make that abundantly clear to your countrymen." With that, the sword sliced downward. The cut was not deep, but it bled down the comte d'Villiers' face, dividing his nose and clefting his chin.

Judson mounted his horse and waved for the woman to be off. She did not smile or attempt to thank him. He turned to d'Villiers. "A strange type of brand, don't you agree? But it should show up well on your white skin."

Geneviève sat at a small table beside the window of her room, her elaborate breakfast untouched. Odile had given up trying to cajole her into eating and had finally left the room. Geneviève had so few pleasures these days that a silly thing like this made her want to giggle like a child. Earlier, she had

overheard the comte instruct Odile to make certain that she ate.

It had not been easy. Even now, it was difficult to look at the elegantly prepared dishes before her. She was hungry. Perhaps she could take a few bites and rearrange the food to look as if it had not been disturbed.

Her ruminations were interrupted by voices in the hallway. Odile was speaking loudly and rapidly. There was a man's voice, but it was not the comte's.

"But I am a doctor. I've just come from your master, who instructed me to examine the girl. Surely, you don't intend to go against his wishes?"

"Please, *monsieur*. I have not been informed! This is highly unusual.

"Get out of my way, woman, or you may find yourself in serious trouble."

The door opened and a man burst into the room. "You may wait downstairs," he ordered with authority, slamming the door in Odile's face.

Geneviève could not believe her eyes. Judson Talbot put his finger to his lips in warning. Unnecessarily, for no words came to her in the shock of recognition. She stood slowly as he came toward her, striding easily with his long, muscular legs. Involuntarily, she thought to herself how attractive he was. Seeing him made her feel immensely relieved, and she was about to run to him when she caught herself. This was impossible! He was not here to befriend her.

His face was anxious as he reached out to her. When he placed his hand on her arm, she pushed him away. He reached for her again and she slapped him.

Judson grabbed her, placing his hand tightly over her mouth. "I want no trouble from you," he growled in a whisper. "Keep silent and do as I say, we have little time. Do you agree not to scream?"

She nodded her head in agreement and he removed his hand.

"What are you doing?" she asked in an insistent whisper.

"I'm getting you out of here. You do want to leave?"

"Of course, but they won't let me."

"We'll find a way." He glanced around the room. One of his hands remained on her arm, the other now held a pistol.

"You don't understand," she pleaded. "They keep me under guard. There will be others with pistols."

"Then we'll have to trick them."

Judson walked to the door and listened. "Someone is coming. Quick, is there another door?"

"Yes, but it's locked. They keep me prisoner."

"Good Lord, woman. Can't you do anything to help? Where is the door?"

Geneviève pulled aside the heavy tapestry. "It leads to the comte's room."

"The comte, my lady, is not likely to be there," he said, kicking mightily at the door. To Geneviève's amazement, it flew open. Judson took her by the hand and rushed into the other room.

"There is a back stairway from this room. I think it leads to the library," she said quickly. There was a clamor of frantic voices from the hall and the sound of many running feet.

Geneviève pulled aside another tapestry and they found the door behind it unlocked. They plunged into the darkness of a tiny, winding stairwell, nearly falling down it in their haste. Judson bumped into a door at the bottom and opened it cautiously.

"Thank God," breathed Geneviève. "No one here."

"So I see," said Judson. "Where do these doors lead?"

"To the entrance hall. The other doors open into the south garden."

They ran through the garden, Judson leading her by the hand. He knew his way now. He had made his entrance to the house through this very garden. If luck were with them, his horse would be waiting on the other side of the high hedge.

It was. He lifted Geneviève onto the saddle and mounted behind her. With one arm around her waist and the other on the reins, he spurred the horse southward, planning to skirt the highway until they were clear of d'Villiers' plantation.

The horse was lathered and breathing hard when Judson slowed him to regain the road.

"Stop! Please stop, I'm going to be sick."

Judson drew up quickly and helped her down. She ran behind a bush and he soon heard her sobbing. "Are you all right?" he called helplessly.

"Of course not," she answered. She emerged from the bush, wiping tears from her eyes. "Didn't I just say I was sick?"

"Well, if you have recovered, we should hurry. The comte's men will be after us." He smiled. Her face was pale,

her eyes puffy, yet still her beauty and her pluck stirred his heart. Framed by her loosened curls, her oval face looked even smaller than he remembered. "You don't seem too delighted that I have rescued you from that fiend."

"I'm exceedingly glad to be free of the comte," she replied. "But I have yet to be rescued. Who will free me from you?"

Judson's eyes narrowed. "I'm trying to help you."

"Help me? Why do you want to help me? Like everyone else, you only want to use me."

In one fluid movement, he grabbed her and had her back on the horse. "This is no time for idiocy, Geneviève," he said from behind her.

On the road, he slowed their pace so as not to draw undue attention. There was no indication yet for alarm, but he could not relax until he had her on his ship. Not even then, if what Madame Bourget said were true. If d'Villiers were as powerful as she suggested, he could expect the authorities to pay his ship a visit very soon. Pray God that André had the *Liberté* ready to sail.

They passed through the city without notice. But even as they neared the waterfront, Judson still had not let down his guard. He was intent on looking for the *Liberté*, when suddenly a man darted across their path. Close on his heels was a large, yelling crowd, which surged into the street and quickly surrounded them. The startled horse reared. Judson, caught unaware, slid off, pulling Geneviève with him.

Geneviève found herself sprawled on the ground, surrounded by swirling legs. She looked about for Judson and realized they had become separated. Instinctively, she got to her feet and ran. She had no intention of becoming anyone's prisoner.

When Judson regained his footing, he searched wildly among the faces for Geneviève's. He was being pushed from all sides, but he paid no attention. For an instant, he saw her as she disappeared around the corner of a warehouse. He tried to follow but the crowd would not free him.

They had got so close, and now she was gone!



## *Chapter 6*

Geneviève woke, feverish and stiff from the cramped position in which she had been forced to pass the night. After escaping Talbot, she had run blindly along the waterfront, dodging in and around the rickety warehouses until she was exhausted. Checking to be sure she was not observed, she ducked into a dark building. It was stacked high with large wooden casks whose pungent aroma indicated their contents as rum. She spent an uncomfortable night wedged between the casks, sleeping intermittently with her head resting on her drawn-up knees. She had hoped to be up and away before dawn, but she had overslept. Male voices, loud and close by, had awakened her.

With difficulty, she pulled herself up high enough to see two black men rolling the casks out to the waterfront to load them onto a waiting longboat. She sat down quickly, her heart pounding, and tried to think. She did not have much time. They would soon reach her hiding place. She must try to slip away from the building while the men were busy lowering the unwieldy casks into the boat. It was a risk, but if they noticed her, she would merely say she had lost her way and wandered into the building by mistake.

The men came back to retrieve another cask. As soon as they were outside again, she crept free of the casks and walked uncertainly toward the blinding sunlight of the doorway. Earlier, she had been weak, now she felt dizzy and her

vision blurred. In a moment of panic, she thought she would not make it. But fear and determination kept her on her feet. Breathing deeply and concentrating on the light, she walked through the doorway and into the already sweltering heat of the morning. She quietly lost herself in the crowds along the wide, dusty waterfront.

The air was heavy, motionless. On the unruffled turquoise of the bay, dark, anchored ships lay languorous as sleeping birds. She stumbled aimlessly into a market. Chickens darted around her feet. The noise of haggling women screaming words she could not understand, babies on their hips screaming in unison, reeled in her head. Suddenly, there was a fountain and she was sitting on its rim, cupping her hands deep into the water for a drink.

It seemed to restore her strength. She raised her head and was met with what seemed hundreds of faces, all staring at her. And why shouldn't they stare, she reasoned, at an apparently drunk white woman alone in a public market, dressed in an elaborate and disheveled morning frock. She was obvious here, too easily recognized. Her eyes searched the crowd, expecting to see d'Villiers or Talbot at any moment. She stood and began to walk, not knowing which way to go, only that she must get away.

She was almost out of the marketplace when she heard a name she recognized. Two men were arguing over a crate of rotten cabbage.

"You expect my master to accept these?"

"If your master wants cabbage, he must accept them. This is all you will find today."

"Monsieur Crevaux would think me addled to buy produce such as this, even if I could stand the smell to carry it to him."

Geneviève was startled to hear the name. Crevaux was a name her uncle had mentioned many times, a close friend from Saint-Domingue. But word had reached them in Savannah two years ago that Crevaux had moved with his family to France, and his plantation was to be run by an overseer. Surely, it could not be the same man? If only it were! Crevaux would befriend her, could help her to return to Savannah. She must find out.

The man who spoke of Crevaux as his master was young and muscular, with high cheekbones and a broad forehead. His teeth gleamed behind an agreeable, open smile. His sable skin so blended with the color of his closely cropped hair that

only their different textures distinguished them. Unlike most of the slaves Geneviève had seen since arriving on this island, he did not have a pained expression and cowering manner. She walked straight to him and asked, "Were you speaking of Alphonse Crevaux?"

The slave looked at her strangely. He had never seen a lady without an escort in this area of town. Finally, he nodded in the affirmative.

"But I thought he had returned to France?"

"Yes, *mademoiselle*, he did return to France. And, now, he has come back." He smiled.

So, it was the same! Geneviève felt her blood rush with excitement. What luck!

"Monsieur Crevaux is a friend of my family," she said. She didn't know how much to tell the slave. "You must take me to him."

"But, *mademoiselle*," he protested, "I've only this dirty wagon. My master would have my head if I let a fine lady ride in it. I'll tell him you're here and he'll send a proper carriage for you."

"No!" she blurted, then tried to control her voice. "No. You must take me with you now. I can't wait here."

Although the slave knew that to take her in the supply wagon was a terrible breach of propriety, he also noticed that she did not look well, and appeared to be frightened. He agreed to take her, hoping that he would not embarrass his master in any way. "My name is Jean," he said as he helped her into the wagon.

Geneviève did not breathe easily until they had passed out of the town. She was not yet out of danger, but a guarded sense of relief spread through her body and she realized how utterly tired she was.

They traveled along the excellent coach road that ran between Port-au-Prince and Mirebalais. She knew the way, having traveled this road twice before under far different circumstances. Once she had ridden in the comte's opulent carriage as his prisoner. And again only yesterday, on horseback with Judson Talbot, who claimed to be rescuing her. Now she was returning, of her own free will, to the interior of this hated island. The heat from the sugar refineries, whose ovens blazed all day, could be felt from the road. She imagined that at night, with the fires and billowing steam, it must seem to travelers like a passage through hell.

Beyond the refineries, the road began to climb into the coastal mountains. The vista, when they reached the summit, opened out upon the lush green of the Plaine du Cul-de-Sac below. Flat and richly cultivated, it was a verdant, geometric carpet, interspersed with the great white mansions of the plantation owners. Teeming beneath it all, unseen from this distance, were thousands of laboring slaves.

The government kept the road in perfect condition to facilitate the comings and goings of the planters. Wagons on plantation business had been much in evidence since early morning. Now, more and more carriages were appearing. Sumptuous two- and four-seaters, some embossed with gold and silver, were smartly drawn by sleek black and white horses. The horses, too, were decorated—with colorful streamers, precious metals and fine leather. Their fashionably dressed passengers were bored and boisterous whites, traveling to town or to soirées at the homes of their friends. To avoid being noticed, Geneviève kept her head down. When they neared the entrance to Bel Jardin, she told Jean she was so overcome with exhaustion that she must find a place to lie down in the back of the wagon.

Jean wondered at the strange behavior of this girl. From her accent, he guessed she was an American, and from good family. How had she come to be in Port-au-Prince alone? And why hadn't she said where she was staying? Her dress looked as if she had slept in it. He knew almost nothing about her. What he did know, and had known for some time, was that they were being followed. He had seen the huge black man overtly trailing them since they had left town. At first, he thought the man must be after him. Perhaps he had angered someone, and a man had been hired to seek revenge. But he could think of no provocation. Then, he remembered the girl's anxiousness. Jean felt uneasy. He didn't want to bring trouble down on his master.

The Crevaux plantation was located at the far end of the Cul-de-Sac. As they neared it, the road became lonelier. Jean decided that he would find out now, before they reached Pacifique, what the big man was up to. He pulled the wagon off the road and brought it to a halt beside a ravine.

Geneviève, who had fallen asleep, woke when the rattling movement of the wagon ceased. Groggily, she asked, "Why are we stopping?"

"We must rest the horses."

"How much further have we to go?"

"Not far, *mademoiselle*. Please, wait here for me," Jean answered, and disappeared into the ravine.

She knew enough about horses to know they were not in need of rest. Feeling very weak, she climbed down from the wagon and walked to the shade of a nearby tree for relief from the relentless sun. Jean was nowhere to be seen. Geneviève began to tremble; she did not want to be left alone.

Suddenly, there was a sound behind her. She turned, relieved, expecting to see Jean. But it was not Jean. It was Samson!

"*Mademoiselle*." His teeth glistened as he smiled at her fear. "You are in the wrong place, *oui*? Monsieur d'Villiers would not be pleased to see you here."

"How did you find me?" she demanded, her voice hoarse with anger.

"I had only to follow and wait. Maybe I'll be a free man when I take you back this time."

"You will not take her anywhere," threatened Jean, who had suddenly reappeared. The huge man turned to face a machete held not five feet from his neck.

In a deft movement, Samson withdrew a knife from beneath his shirt and transformed himself from a burly, slow-witted giant into a cunning animal ready for the kill. Hunched over and holding the knife stiffly at arm's length, he began slowly to circle Jean. Strange, low, guttural sounds escaped from his throat.

Though frightened, Jean held himself steady before the large man. Each waited for the other to make his move. Jean lunged and narrowly missed, throwing himself off balance. Samson dodged expertly, amazing Geneviève with his speed. She looked about for a weapon, seized a rock and hurled it. It glanced off Samson's head and seemed to have no effect at all. Jean had recovered, but Samson was moving closer, flicking the razor-sharp blade in his face so that it flashed in the sun. Geneviève knew that she must take a chance. Samson had now riveted himself to the ground in a wide-legged stance, preparing himself for the final attack. She moved in behind him and, summoning her last reserve of strength, kicked. Her tiny foot landed squarely between Samson's legs.

The blow was enough to distract him. He dropped his arms. In that instant, Jean's weapon came down between his shoulder and his neck, low and deep enough to sever the jugular. Geneviève, who had fallen to the ground, looked on in horror as Samson's body went limp, hung motionless for a long moment, then crumpled.

Jean stared down into the dead man's eyes. They were open and vacant. Then, he knelt to wipe his blade in the sand. "Not a good thing to see," he said quietly. After dragging the corpse out of sight and into the ravine, he joined Geneviève on the wagon seat. "I will return to bury him. No one need know about this."

They drove in silence for perhaps a mile before he spoke again. "It is the first time I have killed a man."

"It is my first time also, Jean."

He looked into her flushed face and saw there, not the vulnerability he expected, but a determination born of necessity. As a slave, something he could easily identify with.

Alphonse Crevaux was fifty years old. His white hair, tan, balding pate and deeply-lined face evidenced a much older man. He had come to Saint-Domingue thirty years ago on instructions from his family, who had fallen on hard times, to purchase land and establish himself. Speculation was rife in France about this island of vast opportunity and easy fortune. He followed his family's wishes and prospered quickly, but inwardly rebelled at being sent from his home and friends. Still, the hectic island society was new, exciting and almost beyond his imagination. He plunged wholeheartedly into it. The desires of the flesh were easier satisfied than eating or sleeping, and much easier to satisfy than those of the mind. Culture was alien. There was no time.

In five years, when he returned to visit France, he had unbelievable stories to tell his friends. He enjoyed his role as the jaded youth. But, it was only a role. He was still bitter. It was the totally delightful daughter of a distant cousin who changed him within a fortnight, and he brought her with him as his wife when he returned to Saint-Domingue. Since then, his plantation, Pacifique, had become an island of culture and kindness. Although he had come to hate the institution of slavery, upon it depended the future of his family, both here and in France. His slaves, however, were considered fortu-

nate. There was a saying much in fashion: "As lucky as a slave of Pacifique." Geneviève could feel a change in atmosphere when passing through the gates of the plantation.

The wagon approached the quietly elegant house. It was surrounded by green lawns dotted with tall palms and flowering bushes of camellia and oleander. The house, two-storied and stuccoed, held an air of welcome. Many glass-paned, double doors lined the ground level. On either side were rose gardens, in one of which crouched the master of the house, busy at his pruning.

Crevaux came to meet them. He was alarmed when he saw Geneviève's condition. "*Mademoiselle*," he asked with concern, "may I be of service?"

"I am Geneviève d'Binet," she said proudly. It was the first time in days she had been able to call herself by her true name. "My adopted father was Guy-Pierre d'Binet."

Crevaux was startled. "Was?" he repeated.

"He is dead." She paled and slumped in his arms.

Crevaux himself carried her to the guest bedchamber. His family and their personal servants were away on a picnic, so he called Marie to make her more comfortable. Marie was Jean's sister and a favored house servant. She was an herbalist in addition to her other duties, and spent many hours ministering to sick slaves; even, on occasion, to the whites in the household. She was knowledgeable and they trusted her. She bathed Geneviève in warm water and covered her shivering body with a heavy quilt, reporting to Crevaux that the girl had Yellow Fever.

"We must send for a doctor. Tell Jean he'll be required to return to town." He saw her face fall at his words. "What is it now, Marie?"

"*Monsieur*, you know that the doctor will only bleed her. That is bad. I know better the ways to treat this fever."

Crevaux was irritated at her insubordination but relented for the moment. Marie had had much success in dealing with the few cases of fever among the slaves. And the doctor was as likely as not to be drunk. "This time, Marie. But, if she's not improved in two days, the doctor will come."

Marie's face beamed as she followed him up the stairs.

They entered the room softly to find Geneviève awake. Crevaux moved a chair to sit by her bed. Taking her hand in his, he told her, "You must not be frightened, my child.

Yellow Fever strikes almost all newcomers to this island. I myself suffered through it many years ago."

"Please forgive me. To come to you like this is . . ."

"I won't have you talk like that," he insisted. "I will treat you just as I would my good friend Guy-Pierre." At the mention of her uncle's name, Geneviève turned her face away. "You must tell me now what has happened."

For the rest of the afternoon, Crevaux sat patiently by her side. Without embarrassment or tears, she related the events that had befallen her. He listened wordlessly, a contained rage surging up within him at each new revelation. Only once did his face register shock. Marie listened also, but could barely keep her comments to herself. She cheered even the slightest triumph and vocally abhorred each degradation, all the while continuing to bathe Geneviève's perspiring face. Twice she administered healing but vile-tasting powders, which she kept in small leather sacks concealed beneath her apron.

Geneviève had drifted into a fitful sleep when Crevaux heard his family return. He met them in the hallway.

"I'm sorry to ruin your gaiety," he announced. "But, a very disturbing situation has arisen."

Seated in the library, he told the basics of the story to his son and two daughters. He dismissed them with the admonition that they must maintain complete secrecy for the sake of the girl's safety. They left the room, and he revealed the details of Geneviève's story to his wife, Catérine. She was horrified.

"Marie is with her now, he explained, "busy with her secret powders. I attempted to send for the doctor, but Marie wouldn't hear of it. It turns out to be a blessing that I did not. The man is one of the Comte d'Villiers' henchmen, and spends most of his waking hours at the house of that Bourget woman."

"I would not allow him to enter my home again under any circumstances, Alphonse. Marie and I will do fine." She looked away from her husband's eyes at the memory of the doctor's last visit, when he had made improper overtures to their youngest daughter. "I must see to Geneviève now." She left her husband alone to mourn the death of his friend.

Alphonse and Guy-Pierre had been close friends, and spent many of their idle hours together. They would talk late into



the night, discussing politics and literature. There were many philosophical discussions about slavery, about the jealousies and excesses of life on their isolated island and its deleterious effects on its people. There was no changing it, they decided. The only way was to leave it.

It was Alphonse who recommended Savannah to Guy-Pierre. He had served there with the French when they had tried to wrest the city from the British in 1779. The long siege and battle were unsuccessful. But in his time there Alphonse had been impressed with what he had seen of the land. Guy-Pierre had taken his advice; he had been the stronger of the two. He left Saint-Domingue behind, to start anew. It was something Alphonse thought about every day.

Guy-Pierre wrote often, imploring Alphonse to join him. He told him of the better life in America, better for the spirit if not for the pocketbook. Think of your children, he added.

Alphonse loved his children. He tried to keep them isolated from the more lurid side of Saint-Domingue. Sadly, he had missed their vibrant school years in France. Now they were back with him, and bored. They were irritated with the monotony and loneliness of plantation life. He didn't know how much longer he could keep them from the ways of their peers.

But he had other obligations. Without his wealth, his family in France would be destitute. What would become of the slaves he must leave behind? Surely, he couldn't transport three hundred slaves to America. Would they be purchased by some sadist like d'Villiers, to be treated as less than animals? Would they be safe if he freed them?

The thought of the Comte d'Villiers enraged him. He walked out onto the lawn to pace. If anyone deserved to be murdered, it was that swine. Yet, in a land where wealth was the rule, d'Villiers was still king. His superior wealth was further supplemented by underhanded activities. Half the people on the island were involved in some form of smuggling because of the restrictive trade laws of France. But d'Villiers gained more in this lucrative enterprise than most. His ships were engaged solely in the slave trade, perhaps because the fatality rate of his own slaves was so high. He had used his wealth and cunning to establish a power base so pervasive that even the Governor-General and the Intendant of the island were subservient to him. He was above justice. No man was so hated and feared.

The night air was suddenly made pleasant by a westerly sea breeze. The rustling of the palm leaves mingled with the muted sound of drums from the slave quarters. Let them have their drums, Alphonse thought, there could be no harm in that.

Who had murdered Guy-Pierre? Alphonse knew of no more likely suspects than d'Villiers and Simone Bourget. Yet, he knew of no dealings between Guy-Pierre and the comte. Madame Bourget was another matter. Everyone had known of their affair, but no one had understood it, least of all Alphonse. Guy-Pierre had once barked at him that it was none of his concern, and he had never mentioned her again. He did think, however, that Simone had greatly influenced Guy-Pierre's decision to go to Savannah. But this was insane. If she loved him—and she apparently had—why would she want to kill him?

Whoever was responsible, the fact remained that Guy-Pierre was dead. Pray God his beloved Geneviève was strong and would survive. Alphonse would care for her as if she were his own. When she was well enough to travel, he would accompany her to Savannah. D'Villiers was not *his* master.

Geneviève's story had shocked and angered him. Yet, the most puzzling part had been her mistreatment at the hands of the young sea captain. Crevaux had been stunned when she had mentioned his name.

Suddenly, he heard sounds of a rider approaching the house. In the darkness, Crevaux could not make out his identity. The man dismounted and walked cautiously to the window of the library, the only lighted room on the ground floor. Instead of calling out to him, Crevaux, suspicious now, walked up silently behind him.

"You are looking for me, *monsieur*?"

The man whirled around to defend himself.

It was Judson Talbot!

## Chapter 7

When Judson had pushed himself free of the angry mob, he rushed to the building behind which he had seen Geneviève disappear. There was no trace of her now. He glanced back and saw that soldiers had arrived to disperse the crowd. He mustn't let himself be seen, for by now the comte would have alerted the civil and military guard and they would be searching for him.

He ran headlong down an alleyway, turned and slowed his pace to that of the people thronging the narrow street. While scanning the many bobbing faces for Geneviève's, he tried also to be mindful of his own safety. Directly ahead, he spotted a unit of *gendarmes* questioning passersby. He ducked into another convenient alley. Geneviève was probably hiding somewhere nearby; she wouldn't want to be seen either. He began to search behind the shops and taverns, abandoning caution in his need to hurry. D'Villiers would soon be waiting aboard the *Liberté*, if he weren't already! Barrels and crates crashed loudly as he shoved them aside. He talked aloud to himself, angrily, and called her name. What was the little idiot thinking, to run away at a time like this?

She had run toward the northern end of the waterfront, that was all he knew. When he realized that she wouldn't be easily found, he calmed himself and began a methodical

search. After a frustrating hour, he reached the end of the area of scattered warehouses and stopped before a jungle of trees. He leaned heavily against a palm that jutted from the shore. A perfect view of the bay spread out in an arch before him. There, bobbing placidly, was the *Liberté*, and drawing menacingly down upon her was a longboat filled with soldiers.

So, he thought, it's all over. Letting his back slide down the tree, he sat and watched as they boarded his ship. From this distance, the scene looked unreal, the soldiers seemed like the miniature soldiers of his childhood. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and let out an ironic laugh. The situation was preposterous. He had tried to redeem himself with the girl, had tried to free her. And, now, thankless wench, she had caused him to lose his own freedom. As a curtain of rain swept down across the scene on the bay, Judson ran for the shelter of a partially collapsed warehouse.

The rain finally ceased, but murky clouds continued to scud overhead, hastening nightfall. Further north along the shore, the flickerings of a cookfire filtered through the trees. Having no plan of action, Judson approached the camp cautiously. Under a small, thatched pavilion sat a rotund woman, her ebony skin glistening in the firelight. Over the glowing coals a large pot was boiling. Its contents filled his nostrils with a spicy aroma, causing a growl deep within his stomach. He watched the woman's busy hands form cassava cakes, which she placed in the ashes to bake. There were several other men and women sitting or reclining near the fire, and, just in the shadows, a man beat softly on a drum held between his knees.

The man with the drum saw Judson first. The abrupt cessation of the instrument alerted the others to his presence. They turned but did not move or speak. These must be free blacks, thought Judson, what do they have to fear from me? He reached into his vest pocket and withdrew some coins, holding them out in his upturned hand. They ignored him and returned to their interrupted conversations. The woman gingerly scooped up one of the steaming cakes and dropped it onto a banana leaf. She filled a clay bowl from the pot and placed it beside the cake. After another long moment, she indicated with a slight movement of her head that it was his. When she plucked out a small coin from his hand, the drumming began again.

Judson sat apart from the others, in a spot where he would have a good view of anyone coming from town. He was just washing down the last of the conch stew and cassava with strong, boiled coffee, when a gangly youth arrived, breathless, to warn that soldiers were coming their way. "Damn," Judson muttered, jumping up and feeling for his pistol.

"*Monsieur*," called the woman. She had been watching him out of the corner of her eye, and when she saw his reaction to the mention of soldiers, she smiled for the first time.

Judson watched her move slightly to the side and pull back her voluminous skirt, which had been spread out around her. She brushed at the sand, uncovered an iron ring and lifted it. It was a trap door. When he hesitated, she nodded impatiently and he realized she was offering him a place to hide!

The dank, earthen hole was not large, and was made smaller from its occupation by a large, grinning black man, who shifted to make room for him. Judson wedged in beside the man, and the woman handed down the drum after him. "They think the drums are voodoo," she explained, and replaced the door, plunging them into blackness.

At length, the door was scraped, bumped and finally drawn open by the woman. Peering in, she said, "They are gone for sure, *m'sieur*. You come out now."

Judson gladly scrambled out of the damp, musty confines, but was not followed by his companion. The door was replaced, and he offered his hand in thanks to the woman. "Let me pay you," he said, reaching for the coins.

She stopped his hand. "Hiding from soldiers we do every day. No one pays. Why do they look for you?"

Judson smiled. "I stole a woman."

There was a gale of laughter at this. "*Monsieur*," said the woman when she had controlled herself, "this is no offense. Here, it is a game." She turned in merriment to the others, "Whose woman did you steal, the Governor's?"

"The Comte d'Villiers'."

"Oh, *monsieur*, you are in deep trouble. You will stay in the hole tonight?" she asked, her face serious now.

He declined. The offer was appealing, but not the accommodations. "I must be on my way, but perhaps you will give me another cake?"

She wrapped several cakes for him. As he was turning to go, he asked, "That man down there, are the soldiers after him also?"

"Oh, no, *monsieur*. That is my husband. I make him stay there when he steal my money."

Judson spent a safe, if uncomfortable night, alternately dozing and arguing with himself. His first obligation was to his ship and crew and, indeed, to himself. He was not a man without connections. Surely, the Governor would understand and provide him with a means of appeasement short of arrest. And, he decided, he would forget this damned girl. She could only make things more difficult for him. He was in enough trouble already. What else could he do? He had jeopardized his crew, his ship, and his reputation with her. . . . But at dawn, as he watched the sun's brilliant coloring of the sky, he decided he would finish what he had started.

Diagonally across the street from Madame Bourget's house was a one-story building constructed incongruously of pink marble. It had once been a church. An elaborate structure with tiny, high windows, it was completely surrounded by a tall, black iron fence. Between the fence and the building, huge oleander bushes had all but taken over the narrow plot of ground. Thick and tangled, they almost obscured the building. Judson slipped unnoticed through the open gate and pushed his way through the bushes and toppled gravestones to a vantage point near the corner of the fence. From here, he could see anyone who entered or left Madame Bourget's.

While waiting, he tried to think as Geneviève might. The girl was resourceful but she had no money and, as far as he knew, there was no one on the island to whom she could turn for help. The Comte d'Villiers was out of the question. Madame Bourget had proven no friend, yet there was a chance, however slight, that Geneviève would go to her. He hoped she wouldn't.

The sun was already high overhead and baking the previous night's rain from the rutted street before d'Villiers arrived. There was no doubt in Judson's mind who sat behind the closed curtains of the swaying landau. A mounted guard of some twenty men accompanied the carriage, the door of which was impatiently thrown open before it came to an abrupt halt. The soldiers waited, frowning from the heat, while he made his investigation of the house.

Judson watched anxiously to see if the comte would depart from the house alone. Just then, he caught sight of a familiar

little figure strolling leisurely past the soldiers. *André*. Come this way, he silently pleaded, please don't stop now!

*André* didn't stop. He walked spryly on toward Judson, whistling loudly, his hands folded across his rump. All the while, his sharp eyes were busy. He came even with the fence and turned to look back at the soldiers. "Is that you, captain?" he whispered.

Judson was surprised that he had been seen. "Of course it's me. But, how did you see me?"

"I was looking for you, captain. What should I do now?"

"Get yourself in here."

When *André* was beside him, Judson hastily asked him about the *Liberté*.

"They have her downshore on a naval mooring. I wasn't aboard when they took her, captain," he said nervously, "but I have seen her. The crew is gone, and she's heavily guarded."

Judson glanced toward the house in time to see the comte striding angrily to his carriage. "Good!" he noted, slapping his knee. "He doesn't have her, *André*. He hasn't found her yet!"

"Captain?"

"Forgive me, *André*. You know nothing of this business. Do you see that man yelling at the soldiers? The one with the cut on his face? Well, it was my sword that made that cut, and that's why we're hiding in these bushes."

"There's more?" asked *André*, thinking of the ship.

"Yes, there's more, *André*. But for now, we should find a more suitable place to hide."

During his vigil, Judson had observed a number of men enter the marble building. None had bothered to knock. When he tested the latch on the heavy, gleaming mahogany door, it swung slowly open into a candlelit anteroom. Crowded against the wall at one end of the room were a marble stoup, carved with a shell motif, and a latticed confession box, its tapestry curtains faded and torn.

"A church?" whispered *André*.

Judson motioned for him to follow and led the way through the only door that was not barred. They found themselves in another small chamber, apparently a dressing room. For, neatly hung within it was a fashionable display of the latest in men's clothing and footwear. There was a special area for

wigs, and a small, wooden trunk with tiny locked drawers. Judson crossed the room to another door, which he opened a crack then quickly closed. He was grinning from ear to ear when he turned to his mate.

"We've lucked onto the perfect place to hide, André," he announced, unbuttoning his vest. "No better place than a crowd in which to lose oneself, and a naked one at that. Take off your clothes, and hurry."

André sadly began to remove his clothes. Repressing a shiver of discomfort, he followed Judson into the next room. He could not believe what he saw.

In the center of the steamy room was a huge, sunken pool. Steps led into the water where men and women stood about completely nude and engaged, it seemed, in casual conversation.

"An unforgettable experience, André. And so convenient. Who would think to look for us in a communal bath?"

Judson found he had to propel André into the chest-high water. The little man's attention was elsewhere, on the young mulatto attendants, bare to their mocha skins. One of them walked toward the two, her small, full breasts jouncing. She entered the water. André swallowed hard as she glided up to him and inquired if he would like her to bathe him. He could not bring himself to answer.

"The man has had an injury to his throat and cannot speak, *mademoiselle*. He would be pleased to have you bathe him." Judson smiled. "Be good to him. He received his injury in battle. He is a hero."

Judson watched in amusement as the girl led André to the washing area and began to bathe his slightly bowed legs. He would be glad to have the grime of the last two days washed from himself, but for now he must keep watch on the door.

Settling back against the cool marble, he felt himself relax in the water. He thought about his recent incautious actions. The Comte d'Villiers had simply proven too potent to handle alone. He would need to seek help, his pride be damned. At this point, he was not in a position to do anything for Geneviève even if he did find her. But there was someone on the island he could trust.

As loath as he was to approach Crevaux with his story, he made up his mind to do so. André could be sent out to procure horses and directions to Pacifique. He sent the



reluctant mate away with instructions to rendezvous outside of town on the Cul-de-Sac Road. Judson slipped out soon afterwards, wearing the clothes and wig of an unsuspecting bather, and walked unnoticed through the streets of Port-au-Prince.

André appeared at dusk, whistling again and holding the reins of two horses.

"What do you intend to do with that horse, André, sell him for passage back to France?" Judson frowned at him as he took the reins of the other mount.

"Since I last saw you, captain, I have also become a fugitive from the law. I had no choice but to steal these horses, you see. Surely, you won't object if I make my escape in your company?"

"You're a fool, my friend. I have no idea what the future holds."

"Then we'll find out together," said André, his face crinkling in an impish grin.

Lightning from a distant storm illuminated the sky at close intervals. Judson was an uneasy guest in the library of Pacifique. He sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair by the fireplace while André, too awed to fully enter the huge, book-lined room, stood by the open garden door from which they had just entered.

Judson had been elated to see his old friend and was surprised when he sensed a coldness, a distance in the older man's eyes. Crevaux poured out three brandies and distributed the snifters.

"Monsieur Crevaux, I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you once again."

"Judson," Crevaux began solemnly, leaning against his massive desk. "Yesterday, I would have said the same to you." Deep lines creased the tanned, slack face.

"I can only presume that you've heard of my plight, *monsieur*. Because of my entanglement with this man d'Villiers, my ship and cargo have been confiscated and I'm being sought for arrest. I felt I could come to you. But perhaps I've made a mistake."

"That will be determined, Judson, after I've heard your side of the story. You see, I've just heard certain things about you. . . ."

"I'm confident that you won't disapprove, *monsieur*, if you'll only hear me out."

"There are things, young man, of which I'll never approve, no matter who does them and under what circumstances. I knew you as an exceptionally brave lad when we fought together in Savannah. And your benefactor, the Comte d'Estaing, I've known for over twenty years, since he was Governor-General of this island. I know him as a man of honor, and I would presume that under his tutelage you, too, would respect honor as the first duty of a gentleman. This was my impression when I visited with you last year in France. Yet, now . . ."

Judson agitatedly broke in. "Surely, you can't fault saving a slave from certain and unjustified death, nor rescuing a woman whom the comte held against her will?"

Crevaux remained calm. "Who was to be put to death?"

Judson told him of the branding of the slaves and of the comte's grisly plans for the woman accused of being a *mambo*. "Yes, justice would have been best left to the lawful authorities, but the situation wouldn't wait. I saved her in the only way possible. That I took d'Villiers with me and detained him seemed necessary in order to rescue the woman held prisoner in his house. Admittedly, to scar his face was unnecessary, but less he didn't deserve."

Crevaux listened attentively. When Judson mentioned the scarring, a fleeting smile crossed his face. He folded his arms across his chest and confirmed, "You were brash, my friend, but your reaction was an admirable one. This kind of cruelty occurs too often here, and the authorities turn a blind eye to it. Sadly, there is little justice to be found on this island." He paused; then, with a pained expression, continued: "It's this current lack of morality that we must all guard against. It can seep into the best of us."

"*Monsieur?*"

"The girl, Judson. What about the girl you took from d'Villiers' house? Certainly you hadn't shown yourself a gentleman to her."

Judson was taken aback at Crevaux's accusation. How had he learned of his relationship with Geneviève?

Without waiting for an answer, Crevaux went on. "To think that word of this will reach the Comte d'Estaing! True, you once saved his life on the battlefield, but he rewarded you

well. He sent you to the finest schools and spared no expense in raising you into the best society. He'll grieve when he hears how you've repaid his kindness."

André, seeing Judson at a loss for words, stepped forward to his defense. "Monsieur Crevaux, forgive me, but you don't know what you're speaking about. My captain would do nothing to bring shame on anyone."

"No, André," Judson held up his hand to quiet his loyal mate. "Monsieur Crevaux is quite right in this." His eyes met Crevaux's. "There is no excuse for my behavior with her. Only let me explain the circumstances."

He told of his teasing visit with Madame Bourget, the abundant consumption of cognac, how Geneviève had later been sent to his ship, presumably as a gift from the woman. "I'm afraid that the things I had recently seen and heard influenced me greatly, even incited me to the point of ruining an innocent girl. It shames me to admit that I didn't know until the next morning that she was a virgin." Crevaux's eyes burned into his own as he continued. "I sailed the same day for America. When I returned, I found that Madame Bourget had permitted d'Villiers to take her. When I abducted her, I was only seeking to rectify my mistake, not to repeat it." His last words did not ring true, even to his own ears.

"Some think otherwise," said Crevaux.

"Who?" he demanded. "I fail to see how such intimate details of my affairs can be so widely known."

"They are not widely known," Crevaux said enigmatically.

"Then how . . . ?"

"Geneviève herself told me. She is a very brave girl, and horribly wronged."

Judson's astonishment made him rise from his seat. "You've seen her?"

"She's a guest in my house at this very moment."

"And is she well?"

"She is not at all well, I'm sorry to say. She's suffering intolerably from Yellow Fever." Crevaux looked suddenly exhausted. His eyes glazed and his face became the mask-like visage of one who seeks to block any further invasion of his sympathies.

"Monsieur Crevaux," Judson said anxiously, "may I go to her?"

Crevaux's eyes regained their brilliance as they fixed on Judson's demanding ones. In a raised, pinched voice, he

answered, "No, you may not go to her. Is it your wish to make her suffer still more? Can't you understand, in your youthful impetuosity, that she despises you for what you've done to her?"

Judson recoiled from the words as if from a physical blow.

"Sit, Judson, and listen," he instructed, his tone returning to normal. "There is more unhappiness in this story than you yet know. When I tell you who it is you've wronged, who truly lies in that bed upstairs, then perhaps you'll better understand my attitude."

Judson lowered himself into a chair and listened.

"Geneviève is the adopted daughter of my good friend Guy-Pierre d'Binet, who moved some years ago to America to escape the inhumanity of this island. He loved the girl greatly, and he wrote to me frequently of her accomplishments and of the fatherly pride he felt in so lovely, brilliant and *compassionate* a girl. He was certain of a marvelous future for her. Now, he's been brutally slain, and his vile murderer kidnapped Geneviève and brought her to Saint-Domingue. But, Judson," Crevaux closed his eyes and rubbed them, "to think that she fell into *your* hands, someone who by all rights should have helped her, and . . ." he hesitated, then dropped his hands heavily to the desk.

Judson's face was pale as he poured himself another drink. He walked with it to the open door, where he gazed out into the night for a long while before he spoke. "Madame Bourget. Do you think she was responsible for the murder? Geneviève, after all, was first in her hands."

"Although she denies it," Crevaux said, "Bourget's reputation speaks against her, and there is the fact that she and Guy-Pierre were lovers. Yet, there isn't any proof. All will be investigated in due time, I'll see to that. But, for now, my duty is to the girl."

Turning, Judson said, "I know you won't let me see her, but I'll do anything in my power to see that she comes to no more harm. You *must* let me do something."

"My friend, at the moment you are powerless to do anything. Trust me with Geneviève. With God's help, I'll nurse her back to health, but you must stay away. Her life is endangered by more than fever, Judson, and I must ask you to leave if you truly value her well-being. If she survives the fever, I promise you I'll see her safely home."

Judson nodded in agreement, the muscles of his jaw clenching in forced restraint. "Come, André. And to you, Monsieur Crevaux, I apologize for the disappointment I've caused you. I hope to see you again under more pleasant circumstances."

"No, Judson. I won't send you away totally without comfort. The Comte d'Villiers is my enemy, as well as yours. You must stay hidden for the time being. Unfortunately, this is a common necessity on Saint-Domingue, but I have a friend who knows about such things. I'll send for him and he'll lead you to the Spanish territory, where you'll be safe from d'Villiers' extralegal influence. When I've seen completely to Geneviève, then I'll take up your problem."

Crevaux opened a small drawer in the desk. "Until then, here is some money to see you through. You may use it to return to France from one of the Spanish ports, unless you wish to wait there until I contact you about your ship."

"Monsieur, I can't take your money."

"You can, Judson, and you will. Now, I'll send for Jean-Baptiste. He is above reproach, one of the trusted mulattoes who served with me in Savannah. He'll be very pleased to aid any enemy of d'Villiers, especially a member of the *Amis des Noirs*."

Crevaux left Judson and André alone in the flickering candlelight of the library. It had finally begun to rain. Judson sipped his cognac, but its smoothness was lost on him. He could not banish his last vision of Geneviève . . . running away from him.

## Chapter 8

### *Savannah*

Standing at the door of his mother's townhouse, Seth McKenna scuffed his boots impatiently as he waited for the servant to answer his knock. The strain of the past two weeks' events showed in his clenched jaw and agitated manner. He brushed back his blond hair in a gesture of annoyance and glanced up at the pink brickwork of the old house. Its endurance reminded him of all that his family had withstood over the years. As an officer's billet during the occupation of Savannah, the house had been abused by the British until the city was recaptured by the patriots. Officers the British were, but not gentlemen, Seth thought scornfully.

When Ellen and Seth were allowed to return to their home, they were horrified at its state of disrepair. Ellen had worked tirelessly to restore the house to its former grandeur, though Seth, as he grew older, came to prefer their plantation house.

"Good morning, sir. I'm slow as molasses today," Letty declared as she opened the door to Seth.

"Never mind, Letty." He smiled at the gray-haired servant.

"I'm sorry all the same. Your mama and Miss Pierce be waiting for you in the library. Go along, now."

"Letty, you get bossier all the time." He laughed.

Seth noticed a crystal bowl filled with cut flowers on the

hall table. They were from his mother's garden. A woman's presence in a house was always apparent, he thought. The house at Fairfield, his plantation, was magnificent, but it lacked a woman's touch. At once, he was reminded of Geneviève, and a worried frown creased his forehead.

Ellen came to meet him, kissing him on the cheek when he entered the library. He studied her face for a moment as she smiled up at him. "Mother, you haven't been sleeping well," he accused when he saw the delicate shadows beneath her eyes.

"I would assume the same of you, dear," she countered gently. "But I don't want you to think of me now. Anne's being here is a great comfort to me."

At the mention of her name, Seth turned to greet Anne Pierce. He felt an unexpected shock of pleasure at the sight of the girl. She held out her hand to him and smiled.

"Seth. It's good to see you again."

He was pleased by her warm, unaffected voice and the gentle pressure of her soft hand. Yes, he mused, maybe more pleased than I should be. Anne Pierce had suddenly become a beautiful woman.

When he had seen her two years ago, a quiet girl with braids, he had thought of her as a child. There had been little evidence of this beauty with deep blue eyes and a heart-shaped face. He had not considered that the carrotty school-girl braids would be replaced by silky, auburn curls, nor that the thin, little-girl figure would sweeten into the curves of a woman.

"Anne," he smiled. "You've grown well."

She laughed. "Thank you Seth."

There was nothing coy about this girl, he remarked to himself. She was fresh and natural, taking simple pleasure from his admiration. But he would have been amazed if she had been less than charming, considering her background. Anne's mother, Lila, was one of Ellen's dearest friends. They had grown up together, and their friendship had remained strong as they married and reared their children.

Hearing of Ellen's distress concerning the tragedy of the d'Binets, Lila had sent Anne to Savannah to comfort her grieving friend. Lila was aware of Ellen's feelings for Geneviève. She knew that Ellen loved the girl as her own daughter, and the weeks of fear were taking their toll.

"Seth," Ellen asked, "have you any news?"

"None. I haven't found anyone with a shred of information that might help us. I spoke with the harbor master, but he has no record of a French vessel passing through Savannah waters at the time of Geneviève's abduction. And Rachel is certain that the man who shot Guy-Pierre was a Frenchman. So, I must presume that his boat was of French registry or at least from a French colony."

"Seth," Anne said, "your mother has told me that Guy-Pierre lived in Saint-Domingue at one time. Could the boat have come from the island? He may have made enemies there."

"Exactly," he replied. "I feel positive that Guy-Pierre had no enemies here in Savannah. He was scrupulously honest in his business dealings and he was admired in society. Surely, the answer lies in Saint-Domingue, but I have no facts to prove it." While Seth spoke, he paced the room restlessly.

"Seth, please," Ellen said. "Do sit down. My rugs will not stand the wear."

"Very well, mother." He laughed. "I'll sit down, but only for a moment. I've promised to spend a few days completing business matters for Rachel, and I should take advantage of the tide."

*Business matters*, Ellen mused. "Dear, is it possible that Guy-Pierre would have left any papers that might provide an answer for us?"

"So I'd thought, but I've searched most of his documents. I've even read the business ledgers. There's nothing. Everything is normal and indicates that Jasper's Landing is a prosperous, well-managed plantation."

Ellen sighed. "I had hoped . . ." her voice trailed off.

"I know what you had hoped," he said. "We can't become discouraged. Too much depends on our efforts. The authorities are useless in these matters. I'll find Geneviève, mother. I give you my word."

"Seth, there's something that you and Ellen may have overlooked in your concern for Geneviève," Anne said thoughtfully. "I've met her, though we only talked briefly. But in that short time, I was very impressed by her intelligence. While we search for her, perhaps we should have more faith in her abilities."

"Yes, Anne, that's true." Ellen agreed, brightening. "Geneviève is exceptional. We must believe that she's resourceful enough to survive until we're able to find her."



"Mother," Seth said, with an appreciative look at Anne, "I can see that I'm leaving you in good hands. I must go now. Rachel is sending a pirogue to take me to Jasper's Landing. If I should discover anything of importance, I'll send word."

"Give Rachel my love," Ellen called as she watched her son stride rapidly down the hall. "Anne," she said, smiling quizzically, "I believe you've made a profound impression on Seth."

Seth scanned the waterfront for the boatmen from Jasper's Landing. He spotted them farther down the shore in a quiet area of the jetty away from the cargo ships that competed for the best anchorage. As he approached, he saw that they were eating their noon meal. The smell of boiled crab and sweet potatoes baked in hot ashes made him regret that he had refused Ellen's invitation to dine with her.

"We ready anytime, Mr. McKenna," Eli, the head boatman, greeted him.

"No, Eli, finish your meal. There's time enough."

"The boat all ready and we about finished. If we go now, we catch the old ebbtide and move light as a leaf on a pond."

Seth laughed. Eli was a favorite of his. A fine-looking old man, no one was more capable with a boat or knew the coastal waters better. Seth had often teased him about his affinity for the sea in order to hear his proud response. "This slave a sailorman," he would say. "I was born on the water, and the water was my mama." And it was true. Eli was born on a slaveship making the passage from Africa. His mother died in childbirth, leaving him a ward of the sea.

"Then cast off, Eli," Seth said. The men released the lines and unfurled the sails. The swift current gripped them, and Savannah receded rapidly behind the pirogue's stern. Seth admired the trim lines of the boat. She was double-masted and flat-bottomed, the perfect coastal vessel. The waters around Savannah and the island that was Jasper's Landing were badly shoaled. A low tide revealed mud flats that foretold disaster for an unwary keel boat. Guy-Pierre had bought the pirogue to ferry his family and friends to and from his plantation. The boat had been christened the *Geneviève*.

Had it not been for the tragedy on the night before the ball, Seth and many other laughing, excited guests would have boarded the pirogue to be sailed by Eli to Jasper's Landing for the festivities. How different the outcome had been.

As they sailed down the coastline, Seth wondered about the boat that had taken Geneviève. Eli! he thought suddenly. Why had he not asked the best boatman on the coast about the French vessel that appeared to have vanished into thin air?

"Eli," he called, "on the night your master was killed, where could the Frenchman have sailed? He didn't come from the harbor at Savannah, and he didn't return there. Could he have hidden along the coast after he took Miss d'Binet?"

"I thought about that, Mr. McKenna. He didn't come from Savannah, for sure. Too many eyes there, he think. Now, a good sailorman could hide in these tidal creeks if he knew the waters. But not this one. The boat peoples on this coast talk, talk all the time. If the big boat like this Frenchman had was to hide along this coast, Eli would know. What that boat did was sail straight out to sea."

"That's what I thought too, Eli," Seth said. But, he wondered, did he sail for Saint-Domingue? He'd try to put the question from his mind until he reached Jasper's Landing. Possibly he would find an answer in the few remaining papers he had promised to examine for Rachel.

Eli swung the tiller to port, and the boat tacked smartly into a large tidal creek, which wound its way from the Savannah to the Wilmington River. Jasper's Landing lay at the mouth of the Wilmington, with the protective arm of Wassaw Island sheltering the plantation from the sea. The area was as remote as it was beautiful, and to reach the Landing by the short route through the marshes was a challenge to any boatman.

The pirogue slid along in the rapid current, past acres of timberland and the spartina grass of the marshes Seth loved so well. They passed black women casting their nets into the shallow waters for mullet and boiling their catch of blue crab over small fires. The women smiled and waved to the boatmen and were quickly left behind.

"The crab is sweet this time of the year," Eli grinned. They shell so thin you think that crab just *want* to give away all that good meat."

Despite his worry, Seth realized that he was enjoying the boat trip. He was startled to discover that he wished Anne could have come with him. Why did he feel this when his concern for Geneviève was so strong? The contradiction

puzzled and annoyed him. He must be mad to consider another woman when Geneviève was promised to him. But the warmth that he felt when he remembered Anne's gentle, direct voice would not be banished.

The channel to Jasper's Landing opened before them and the wind freshened, requiring all hands to mind their positions as they approached the landing. Eli headed the boat into the wind to lose momentum, and they slid softly against the pier in a skilled maneuver.

"Eli, you are a sailorman," Seth affirmed, smiling.

"Thank you, Mr. McKenna," the slave said as he made fast the bow. "I sail you anytime."

Seth could see the roofline of the house above the treetops as he followed the crushed shellwalk from the pier. The sight sobered him—only weeks before he had been elated as he walked the same path. He rested for a moment beneath a huge oak festooned with moss beards. What a happy, idyllic home this had been. Who could have laid to waste that happiness in a single evening and left not a clue? He pushed a palmetto frond aside and started for the house.

Seth found Rachel seated at a table on the terrace adjoining the blue salon. He was shocked to see that she had grown thinner in the few days that he had been away. Her black mourning gown accentuated her wan appearance. It was difficult for him to keep the pain he felt from showing in his face. Gay, charming Rachel had always been more an older sister to Geneviève than an aunt. Now, she suddenly seemed old. Seth knew that he could do little to mitigate Rachel's grief for Guy-Pierre, but he could try to restore Geneviève to her. He determined that nothing would stand in the way of his efforts.

"Seth!" She smiled when she saw him. "I'm so grateful that you've returned."

"Mother sends her love. She'd like you to visit her when we've completed these few business matters."

"Dear Ellen," Rachel sighed. "But, Seth, I can't leave the Landing. I must become accustomed to the fact that Guy-Pierre is gone. That will be as painful in Savannah as it is here. Also, the house should be maintained for Geneviève when she returns." Rachel's eyes filled. "I must believe that she'll return. But let's not talk of this now. I've ordered a light meal prepared for us. It's so nice not to dine alone."

When the meal had been cleared away by the servants,

Rachel broached the subject that Seth had tactfully avoided. She walked to the terrace wall and stood looking across the marshes.

"Seth, the remaining papers that require attention are in Guy-Pierre's desk. That's why I've delayed examining them. As you can understand, I haven't entered the library since his death. It's very painful to think of that night, all too vivid still. If you could attend to the contents of the desk, we would be finished with this unpleasant task."

"Yes, of course, Rachel. We've nearly completed the transfer of the estate. If I should find personal papers, how do you wish me to handle them?"

She paused, thinking. "I'll give you a small box. Read the papers first, then lock them away. For now, I have my memories. Someday I may be brave enough to find pleasure in Guy-Pierre's correspondence."

Seth kissed her hand and left her by the terrace wall, gazing dry-eyed across the marshes.

Seth glanced around the dim, paneled library. The room had been put to rights by the servants, but it was otherwise undisturbed since the night the Frenchman had intruded on their lives. Guy-Pierre's pipe lay in a tray on his desk, the bowl still filled with ash. The books the women had been reading, retrieved from the floor where they'd dropped, now lay on the table between the leather chairs. Harshly, Seth willed his mind to the work at hand.

He studied the pigeonholes of the heavy mahogany desk before removing the papers contained in each slot. After reading each sheet methodically, he put it aside. These records pertained to the plantation and did not belong in Rachel's sandalwood box. A thick bundle of letters that Rachel had written to Guy-Pierre during their courtship was placed in the box after a discreet glance at the contents. There is nothing here, he thought, that will aid in finding Geneviève. Discouraged, he drummed his fingers idly on the carved relief of the d'Binet crest adorning the panel between the pigeonholes. He felt the ornament resist the pressure of his fingertips. When he withdrew his hand, the panel swung open to reveal a small drawer. Recovering from his surprise, Seth slid the drawer out of the compartment and removed its contents. The hiding place held only a slim, black leather volume. Turning the book over in his hands, he watched as the pages opened to a section marked by a single sheet of

paper. Seth picked up the sheet and examined it. Frayed at the edges from frequent handling, the letter bore no date or salutation. He hesitated, dropping the paper to the desk.

He had no desire to know more than Guy-Pierre had been willing to tell him about his life. Surely, his friend had not meant the letter or the book to be found. But Seth knew that he could ill-afford to ignore anything that might have bearing on the man's murder or on Geneviève's disappearance. And so, he picked up the thin sheet and began to read.

It was written in French and penned in a woman's hand. But what manner of woman? he wondered. For, never had he read a more vicious diatribe. His eyes searched the page. The scrawled signature read: Simone.

Seth's head throbbed. So, Guy-Pierre had had a love affair with this woman. From the letter, he gathered that she was enraged that he had not offered her marriage. When d'Binet ended the affair, Simone had written to him, threatening his life. She demanded repeatedly that he return to her.

*Return to her*, thought Seth frantically. Where was she? France? Saint-Domingue? Where Simone was, he felt, Geneviève would also be. Surely, this was the answer he had sought.

Feverishly, Seth opened the small black book. As he'd guessed, it was a journal. He flipped the pages, searching for the name Simone. He found the first mention of her in Guy-Pierre's record of his early days in Saint-Domingue. "I have been introduced to a most beautiful young girl," the entry read. "Her name is Simone Bourget." Seth allowed his head to drop to his hands in relief. *Saint-Domingue*. He had felt from the first that the answer lay there. And Simone Bourget must be involved. Who else could hate Guy-Pierre to this extent? He would secure passage to the island at once. But first, he'd read the journal. His eyes scanned Guy-Pierre's bold handwriting. "She is of a loving and kind disposition," the entry continued.

Oh, my friend, Seth thought sadly, if only you had known. . . .

## Chapter 9

### *Saint-Domingue, 1766*

Maurice Coutard sat alone at a table in the Black Parrot Tavern. He glanced up as the heavy door slammed behind his young friend, Guy-Pierre d'Binet. "Here, Guy-Pierre," he called. "Here's a place for you."

He noted the change in d'Binet, as he watched the younger man weave his way between the tables in the crowded tavern. In the month's time that d'Binet had been on the island, his face had burned dark from the sun, and his frame had grown sinewy from hours spent on horseback. He moved with a fluid command of his body. The youth who had arrived from France was quickly becoming a man. Good, Maurice thought, the island has hardened him. And none too soon. This is not a place for boys.

"Maurice, you're looking well." Guy-Pierre grinned as he pulled back the chair.

"If you hadn't arrived at this very moment, that might not have been the case. Do you see the gentlemen standing near the wall?" indicated Maurice. Guy-Pierre turned to glance at several well-dressed planters. They stared sullenly over their pewter wine cups in his direction.

"Our fellow planters have taken the greatest offense that I presumed to save a place for you. Had you delayed, I would,

no doubt, have been challenged. Most distressing to the digestion."

"Maurice, your loyalty and obstinancy are greatly appreciated." Guy-Pierre laughed. "I'm pleased that you suggested this place. It looks exciting."

"That I can't deny," Maurice agreed wryly. "Every planter in Saint-Domingue passes through the Black Parrot. Their business deals conducted here may be questionable, but the brandy is the finest from France, and the food is the most delicious the island has to offer."

Guy-Pierre looked about the dark-paneled room. The chairs and tables, crudely fashioned of heavy wood, were crowded together in groups around the stone floor. Large brass lanterns, hung between the shuttered windows, were the only adornment on the walls. The sweet fragrances of roasting coffee, ripe bananas and brandy pervaded the air. The room was filled with elegantly dressed men, some drinking and laughing, others gambling away enormous sums of money at corner tables.

"I like it here." Guy-Pierre smiled. "My friend, I am convinced that this island holds my destiny. And the women—ah." He kissed his fingertips in a gesture of delight.

Maurice laughed. "I can well understand your enthusiasm, Guy-Pierre. Rarely have I seen the ladies of Port-au-Prince as hospitable to a newcomer. I give you fair warning, I may become envious of you if this continues."

Guy-Pierre ordered another claret and leaned across the table toward his friend. "I tell you, Maurice, I never dreamed a society such as this existed. There seems to be no end to the available pleasures."

"True. But, what of your plantation?" Maurice changed the subject. "All goes well?"

"Yes, very well. I've found an excellent overseer. In fact, there's so little for me to do that I must amuse myself in Port-au-Prince," he said in mock sorrow.

"You're incorrigible!" Maurice guffawed. "We'll have to seek a settling influence for you, that's clear."

"Surely, you wouldn't spoil my enjoyment?" Guy-Pierre grinned.

"No, no, on the contrary. I have something in mind for tonight. I'm sure you'll be amused."

"Arrangements? You don't intend seeking a wife for me?"

"Of course not. I have only pleasurable arrangements in mind."

"Good." Guy-Pierre laughed. "The altar holds no attraction for me."

"Don't worry, Guy-Pierre. You know I'm not a man of extremes. We'll have dinner here, then visit the salon of a friend. Several young girls will be there this evening. They are reported to be quite beautiful. Each is seeking a *liaison* with a man of our station. It could be that one of these *femmes de couleur* will be to your taste."

"*Femmes de couleur*? They're lovely, I understand. Coffee and cream, yes?"

"Some have that coloring, but others are as golden as honey. Their skin tones vary. But, Guy-Pierre, what is constant is their sensuality and their desire to please. Even the youngest of these women is knowledgeable in the ways and needs of a man."

"Such an evening sounds most intriguing."

Guy-Pierre chuckled to himself as he eyed Maurice. He was aware that his friend had little interest in the kind of evening he had just suggested. Maurice was well satisfied with his present mistress. Besides, he would shortly be returning to France. Having accrued enormous wealth from his plantation on Saint-Domingue, he no longer found the society of the island novel. Coutard intended to lead a life of leisure among the aristocrats of France. Guy-Pierre didn't envy him. Someday, he might feel as Maurice did, but for now he was content.

As the two men entered the room, they were approached by their smiling hostess. Dominique Gruault's salon was the most fashionable in the city, Guy-Pierre recalled. He was sure that this tiny elegant woman had been beautiful in her youth. She still had fine features and regal carriage. The men bent low over the small cool hand she offered before she guided them into the salon.

"Monsieur d'Binet, you are recently arrived in our city," Dominique said. "Had you been with us longer, I would have heard of one so handsome." She smiled. "It is my wish that you visit us often."

Guy-Pierre smiled at the glib speech. He was aware that for the *femmes de couleur* charm was a means to survive. In a



society dominated by the *grands blancs*, beauty and desirability were the attributes needed for these women to ascend the social ladder. The ultimate achievement for them would be marriage to a *grand blanc*, with the ensuing social acceptance by whites.

When this was not attained, as was obviously the case with Madame Gruault, the women would often preside over a salon in their homes. If the salon were successful, they frequently became powerful and influential figures in the complex social structure of the island.

"Madame," Guy-Pierre replied, "you are too kind. It is my pleasure to be invited to your home." Guy-Pierre felt relaxed and confident in his new surroundings.

The salon was not large, he observed. But the room was attractive and tastefully furnished with carved fruitwood and expensive French fabrics. A number of people were gathered in small groups, chatting animatedly as the servants offered wines and brandy from silver trays.

"Maurice," Guy-Pierre asked when their hostess had left them, "are all of the women present *gens de couleur*?"

"Yes, all. And aren't they magnificent?"

Guy-Pierre's eyes shone as he studied the guests. "This is surely the dream of every bachelor, Maurice."

"Of every married man as well." Maurice chuckled. "We aren't all as fortunate as you, Guy-Pierre. But, come, I'll introduce you to the ladies. Many delights are in store for you."

*April 3, 1766*

*I have been introduced to a most beautiful young girl. Her name is Simone Bourget. She is of a loving and kind disposition. She is only fourteen years old, but she possesses the sensuality of an experienced woman. Yet, there is also the shy, innocent quality that is so appealing in a young girl. I find her natural demeanor far more exciting than the brittle and obvious attempts by French women to draw attention to themselves. Possibly, the atmosphere of the island is responsible for Simone's languid acceptance of her beauty and its noticeable effect on others. I was most certainly stunned.*

*Maurice and I had just entered the gathering at Madame Gruault's and were speaking with friends, when I saw her. Surrounded by a large group of*

*admirers, she was reclining against the cushions of a loveseat, wearing a striking gown in gradations of red. About her shoulders the dress was a pale pink, deepening to crimson, then garnet at the hem. With her black curls and dark eyes, she made a lasting impression on my mind. Even in the court of France where, as I understand, the women think of little other than their appearance, I have never seen a more delightful pose. I wasted no time in securing an introduction.*

*Maurice found my immediate attraction to Simone amusing, but assisted me in finding my way through her circle of admirers. Simone was receptive to my attentions. She soon discouraged her other courtiers, to spend her time with me alone. Before the evening had passed, I agreed to speak with her mother on the following night. This is not a meeting I anticipate with pleasure. Maurice has informed me that in order to see Simone, I must become her protector. This is the custom among the gens de couleur, and the mothers of these girls are most rigid in their demands. So be it. Though I am not comfortable with this custom, I must have her.*

Guy-Pierre guided the bay gelding through the crowded streets of Port-au-Prince. The animal sidestepped nervously as the gaudy carriages of planters and their ladies whipped by with a rattle of wheels and trappings. Everyone in the city seemed anxious to take advantage of the cool morning to complete their errands. Fortunately, d'Binet was in no hurry.

Three mulatto women smiled and gazed boldly at him, increasing the sway of their hips. Pleased, he returned their smiles but maintained his pace. "Dieu!" he swore softly. "What women, these." They reminded him of exotic birds. He glanced back at the brilliant cerise, blue and yellow of their elaborate headdresses to find their eyes still following him. Drawing himself up in the saddle, he reflected on the fine figure he must look. The lastborn of his family, Guy-Pierre was the perennial child in some respects—a bit vain, rather mischievous, but charming and generous. He quickened the gelding's stride. Soon, he would know even greater pleasures, for he would see Simone.

Turning onto a shady street, he halted the bay before a pale blue house trimmed with cream filigree. Before dismounting, he studied the fanciful structure intently. Only the week

before, he had purchased this house for Simone. Together they had examined several houses, but Simone had insisted that only this one would do. She admired the handcarved wooden trim and the pair of fragile spires that adorned the roof. The structure was two stories high, with an encircling balcony supported by slender wooden columns. From each of these pillars latticework extended to the next support to form an archway. On either side of the walk leading to the entrance, flowers bloomed in tiny fenced gardens.

Guy-Pierre was amused by the house. It reminded him of the doll house his sister had received on her birthday when they were children. He threw back his head and laughed. The gelding quivered at the unexpected sound.

"Guy-Pierre, why are you laughing, *mon chéri*?" Simone stood on the balcony smiling down at him.

Ah, my precious one, he thought. Never have I seen a more magnificent creature. "It's because of you that I'm laughing. You make me happy," he called up to her.

"Guy-Pierre, you're shameless. Come inside. All of Port-au-Prince will know of our love."

"They should know," he said as he dismounted. "Perhaps the knowledge will keep other men from your door. I'm a terribly jealous man." He turned his face up to her, pulling a ferocious expression.

Simone giggled helplessly at his foolishness. "Guy-Pierre, you're mad. I'm going inside. Margrit will admit you. Come to me in the small salon," she called as she disappeared through the French doors.

When Margrit answered his knock, he could not resist teasing her. A little older than Simone, she was a shy *femme de couleur* with large, gray eyes.

"Margrit, your mistress *will* insist on formalities. Would you kindly inquire if she is at home to Guy-Pierre d'Binet? He craves an audience with her at the first opportunity?"

Margrit smiled and lowered her long lashes. "I believe she will receive you in the small salon, *monsieur*."

"Margrit, I am relieved. I feared she might have gone out for the day."

Margrit could not suppress a faint giggle as Guy-Pierre strode past her. She felt that her mistress was fortunate to have secured such a protector. Often enough, she had seen *femmes de couleur* accept another type of man altogether. Though wealthy, they were old or unattractive and even

treated their young mistresses with cruelty. But this one was handsome and light-hearted and most certainly generous, she thought, as she took in the expensive furniture d'Binet had urged Simone to buy. Margrit envied her mistress this young Frenchman. Had she been as beautiful as Simone, this house might have been hers. The *cocotte* heard the happy laughter from the salon with bitter resentment.

Guy-Pierre drew Simone to him, feeling the warmth and softness of her flesh beneath the fine cambric of her gown. He pressed his lips to her throat and breathed the fragrance of her skin. She had just come from her bath, and the perfume of the waters mingled subtly with the sweetness of her body.

"*Comme je t'aime, Guy-Pierre,*" she whispered. Her mouth sought his, and he felt her soft lips part, increasing his desire. He pressed aside the fragile lace that veiled her breasts, his mouth moving over the sleek, golden skin. "*Come, mon petit,*" she murmured.

He followed her down the hall to her bedchamber. When the door had closed behind them, he embraced her. "*Non,*" she resisted, "I wish to do this for you." Smiling, she released the fastenings of her gown, and allowed the garment to slip softly to the floor. As she raised her arms to loosen her hair, the coral nipples of her full breasts strained against her chemise. Guy-Pierre was trembling. Never had he known a woman who was as capable of arousing his desire as Simone.

He watched as she untied the ribbon that held her chemise. Slowly, she drew the garment from her to reveal her full, high breasts and slender hips. With the controlled grace of a dancer, she stepped from the lacy froth of chemise and gown and came to him. In his impatience, he could not wait for her to undress him. He stripped off his own garments and attempted to draw her near. But she eluded him, teasing him to even greater desire. Laughing softly, she slid onto the bed, holding her arms up to him. With a long, deep moan, he lowered his body to hers and gloried in the sensation of the cool silk comforter and the heat of their joined flesh. Hungry for her, his mouth covered hers, probing the sweet warmth. In answer to his need, she arched against him. Her breasts pressed against his taut chest as her hips moved in time with his.

She felt him hard against her belly, but wanting to prolong their pleasure, she moved away slightly. "Simone, you little witch," he murmured huskily, his fingers tightening in her

hair. He caressed the silky skin of her breasts with his lips, taking and releasing the nipples, until her need was equal to his. She lifted them in her hands, offering them to him with a little moan. As he buried his face between her breasts, his fingers slid down her belly to her thighs. At his touch, Simone parted for him, encouraging him to explore the smooth, velvet flesh. Guy-Pierre could feel her response beneath his hand. His fingers moved higher, teasing, stroking until Simone reached for him, guiding him into her. At the first touch of her flesh around him, Guy-Pierre cried out in an agony of pleasure. Then her slender legs encircled him, drawing him deep into her body. The blood pounded in his head to the harsh rhythm they created. With every thrust, Simone arched beneath him. Her nails were sharp against his back, and she whimpered softly as she felt him swell within her. Together they rose to the greatest pleasure Guy-Pierre had ever known. A frenzied tattoo of pulsing explosions shook them and released their wonder at that piercing interlude of surrender to each other.

"Simone," he said softly, as he lay beside her, gently tracing a damp curl above her ear. "You give me so much. No other woman could be for me what you are."

"There must never be another woman." She pulled away from him, struggling to sit up. Her dark, silky hair fell around her breasts, which were rosy from lovemaking. Her eyes were black with anger.

"Simone, don't be an idiot, come here," he said. "You are my every thought, and you talk of other women." He pressed her to the bed playfully. "But what will you do if I have other women, eh?"

Her gaze did not waver as she answered him. "I will kill you, Guy-Pierre, for you are *mine*."

"Then I must see that you are always too exhausted for murder, *ma chère petite*." His strong teeth flashed a grin as he turned her over, roughly pulling her to her knees. "Murder?" he whispered against her ear as he fit his body to hers. "We will see." He heard her laugh deep in her throat as she set the slow, deliberate rhythm that drove him to frenzy.

October 22, 1770

*I have just now come from Simone, and again she presses me for marriage. This is the one wish that I will not grant. Repeatedly, I have explained to her my*

reasons, but she is obsessed with the notion of becoming my wife. I cannot dissuade her. Each time our discussions end in anger and harsh words. She swears I do not love her, and I maintain she cares only for my name. The truth is more complex. I do love her, but not more than my family name. For me to marry a *femme de couleur* would bring disgrace to the d'Binets. I would become a pariah. Of course, a man of wealth may purchase a *lettre-patent* for his mistress, proclaiming her white. They would then be free to marry. But what is this but a lie? I have come to loathe the society that creates an elegant woman such as Simone, then denies her the station in life she deserves. Her father, Henry Bourget, was a Frenchman, and one of the richest planters of Saint-Domingue. He supported Simone and her mother in luxury, schooling Simone in France as he did his legitimate children. But because of her mixed racial background, she is shunned by her father's class in all but matters of pleasure. So. I am either too weak or too wise to fly in the face of all custom and marry her. But give her up, I will not. I love her too dearly.

Guy-Pierre's tanned face flushed with anger as he listened to Margrit's words. "There are guests in the salon, *mon-sieur*," she said hesitantly. This wasn't the first time that Simone had invited guests against his wishes. Hadn't he specifically told her that he desired to be alone with her tonight? And again she had filled the house with chattering fools.

"Tell your mistress that I will speak with her at once in the small salon," he told Margrit curtly. He spoke tersely to the other guests, turned on his heel and mounted the stairs.

"Guy-Pierre, Margrit has told me you are very angry."

He ceased pacing the floor and turned to her. *Mon Dieu*, she was beautiful tonight.

Simone had taken great care to prepare herself for the evening, anticipating just such a scene as this. Deliberately, she had planned her strategy and her appearance. Her entreaties to Guy-Pierre for marriage had failed miserably, and she was fearful of his long absences as well. He was spending more of his time in France than ever before. Though she had no proof, she was sure that he saw other women. Worse, he did not require her faithfulness when he was away.

Possibly, she might still attain her dream of marriage by arousing his jealousy.

Her violet gown of ribbed silk had been selected to flatter her figure. The tightly fitted bodice revealed her tiny waist to advantage and lifted her beautiful breasts to be displayed by the plunging neckline. A gauze collar in delicate pink framed her warm coloring. Yes, she felt at her best, but still she was on guard.

"Simone," Guy-Pierre addressed her sharply, "why have you invited these people here? You knew I wished to be alone with you tonight. Is this a deliberate insult?"

"But no, Guy-Pierre. These are my friends. I rely upon their company when you're away. I thought you'd be pleased to meet them."

"Let's be forthright, Simone. It's true that I've been away a great deal. Haven't I given you your freedom during my absences? I've never begrudged you that. But when I'm in Port-au-Prince, I insist that you respect my wishes."

Color rose to Simone's cheeks. "You don't begrudge me my freedom when you know full well that I wish only to belong to you as your wife. Pah! What is freedom?"

"Enough. We won't discuss this further, Simone. It will only lead to more angry words."

"Very well, Guy-Pierre. If you don't want me, you shouldn't be surprised when I find another. Could it be that you've replaced me with someone you've met in France? Well, I could do the same."

Guy-Pierre's eyes narrowed. "Don't threaten me, Simone. This behavior is unlike you. Surely, you realize you're the only woman I love. If this feeling is mutual, take care. For now, go back to your guests. But Simone—when I come tomorrow, I don't expect your home to resemble a salon."

Mounting his horse, Guy-Pierre turned in the direction of the Black Parrot. A brandy would settle his seething emotions. Despite their constant quarreling, his hunger for her was greater than ever. Certainly, he had women in France, but they were merely a diversion. What a hellish situation I've created, he reflected, grimacing. Anxious to reach the tavern, he kicked his horse into a canter.

*January 11, 1780*

*With a heavy heart, I leave this accursed island. On two accounts I grieve. My first sorrow is that I must*

leave behind my dear friend Alphonse Crevaux. On his advice, I have decided to settle in America. He knows the town of Savannah well and has high praise for the area. I wish he could join me in this move. His finances prohibit him from doing so, though he longs to leave Saint-Domingue. I will miss him sorely.

Then, there is the matter of Simone. I cannot give her my name, and my love will not suffice. To be truthful, I can no longer even offer her my love. Simone has changed beyond recognition. Her house has become a salon of the common sort, though she denies this to me. In anger, she flaunts her relationships with other men, perhaps to goad me to marriage. Have I been responsible for her change in character? Had I not come into her life, would she have attained a respectable marriage, and thus had no cause for angry resentment? I hope she may find permanent happiness with another. She is young and beautiful and will be sought after when I am gone. I have given her the house and will settle a large sum of money on her. She will never be in need. But this doesn't balm my conscience if I have wronged her. The uncertainty may plague me for the rest of my days.

As to Saint-Domingue, I quit her without regret. All profit and pleasure wrung from her soil is taken at the expense of another's pain. As a youth, I saw only her abundant delights, but as I grow older, it is her corruption that strikes me. I am not above the ways of this society. Neither can I change them. But I must try to change my own.

Simone Bourget stood alone on the balcony of her home. Her eyes followed a ship as it hoisted sail and moved with increasing speed out of the bay. Grief darkened her face, and her full lips pressed into a thin line of rage. "It is not finished, my love," she whispered harshly. "So long as I breathe, it is not finished."



## *Chapter 10*

Judson felt acute disappointment when Jean-Baptiste Lacour was introduced to him. Although he knew the man to be several years older than himself, he had the cheeky look of a mere boy. And, contrary to what Crevaux had described, he possessed a decidedly unmilitary mien. This was the man to whom he and André were to entrust their lives? There must be more to the lad than meets the eye, thought Judson. But as they departed soon after Lacour's arrival, there was no time to become acquainted.

It was already near dawn when the three men set out eastward from the Crevaux plantation. The lashing rain had stopped, but they were capriciously assaulted by huge droplets from overhanging trees. Their boots and breeches became soaked as they brushed past tall, rain-heavy bushes. There was no obvious trail, but Jean-Baptiste led them confidently through the darkness. They rode without speaking, the only evidence of their passing the steady, muffled sound of the horses' hooves treading the soft earth. By first light, they had come into a treeless region blanketed with long, tangled grasses, made eerie by a listless, hovering ground fog.

Judson watched with distrust the graceful young man riding in front of him. He had the bearing of an aristocrat, yet his clothes were plain and unfashionable. Of medium height, he was slender but muscular. His European features were en-

hanced by the smooth, golden color of his skin. His curiously blue eyes matched Judson's in intensity and contrasted vividly with the gleaming black hair that fell in soft ringlets to his collar. Judson thought derisively that he had the look of a bon vivant fallen on hard times.

This assessment did not entirely belie Jean-Baptiste's nature, but there was a great deal about the man that was deceptive. Despite his youthful appearance, he had had experiences in his twenty-eight years that were unknown to men twice his age. And they had indelibly molded him. Judson was soon to discover the error of his first impression.

They were now riding across bare, hard ground, a desert region sprouting cactus and mesquite. In the distance ahead lay a huge lake. By the time they reached it, red streamers from the rising sun were appearing on the horizon and reflecting across the mirror-smooth surface of the water. The beach where Jean-Baptiste dismounted was strewn with shells and coral.

"We'll stop here, my friends," he announced. "Just over there is the Spanish border. There's no need to hurry now. I'm very hungry," he added, laughing.

Judson and André held their reins suspiciously as they watched Jean-Baptiste rummage through his saddlebag. He withdrew the cloth-wrapped bundle that Crevaux had thrust at him just before their departure. From it he produced three roasted birds and a loaf of bread.

"Just as I suspected," he said and placed the cloth with the food carefully on the ground. "Monsieur Crevaux has always believed in a bit of luxury in the field. This I learned when I was privileged to serve with him in Savannah." He returned to the saddlebag and brought out a bottle of champagne.

Judson and André exchanged looks of curiosity. They shrugged their shoulders and joined him. "Where and how far we are going?" asked Judson, swallowing and passing the bottle back to Jean-Baptiste.

"A nice little piece."

Irritated, Judson pursued, "Will we arrive by nightfall, or within the hour?"

"By nightfall, surely. We'll follow the north shore of this lake, then head southeast for Barahona. I have a friend there who will look after you well. Speaking of Savannah, Monsieur Talbot, I hear we were compatriots in that unfortunate campaign."

"So it seems," said Judson.

"I'm taking a great liberty, you know, to eat with you," said Jean-Baptiste. "It's not the custom for an *homme de couleur* to eat with a white. But, we're so close to the border, and over there it is permitted."

"What?" Judson frowned. "What do you mean by that, *monsieur*? In Paris, I've dined many times with *gens de couleur*."

"But, you see, Paris is another world. I know of your association with the *Amis des Noirs*. Surely, in Paris they told you of our life here? Yet, since you've called me '*monsieur*,' I think not. That form of address isn't permitted me here. And don't you wonder why I wear these ridiculous clothes? I'm a wealthy man, Monsieur Talbot, but I can't wear the clothes of the day. European fashions are considered too fine for my people."

"I knew, of course, that you weren't treated as equals, and that there were hardships, but . . ." Judson cleared his throat. "I wasn't aware . . ."

"Forgive me, *monsieur*. I've made you feel ill at ease. I know you're not my enemy. Far from it," reassured Jean-Baptiste.

By the time they reached their destination, Judson had learned enough about Jean-Baptiste to transform his distrust into admiration. And enough about the humiliations forced upon the *gens de couleur*—many of whom were wealthy and owned a third of the land of Saint-Domingue—to hate the ways of the colony even more.

Jean-Baptiste had been born in Saint-Domingue. So had his mulatto parents, who owned a sizable plantation in the Arbonite Valley. He was schooled in France and, at the age of eighteen, served with the *Chasseurs Volontaires de Couleur* of Saint-Domingue, who fought valiantly under d'Estaing at Savannah. His military obligations behind him, he returned to France to learn goldsmithing. But by the time he was ready to practice his art in his own country, this profession—indeed, all professions—had been prohibited to the *gens de couleur*. In addition, he found himself subjected to curfews, segregation in theaters and churches, and every other restriction the whites could devise.

His brother, Gaston, to whose house in Barahona he was now taking them, had fled Saint-Domingue. He had struck an

insulting, drunk *petit blanc*, and would have had the offending hand cut off as punishment had he remained. Gaston, explained Jean-Baptiste, withdrew into religion and found a place for himself in the Spanish part of the island, called by them, Santo Domingo. *Gens de couleur* were allowed to enter the priesthood there.

"We're going to stay with a priest?" asked André, but no one paid him any attention.

"If there's less prejudice here, then why don't you move also?" questioned Judson.

"It's complicated, my friend. Perhaps when you've been here longer, you'll understand."

"So, you've decided to come back to us. Do you remember me?" It was the low, resonant voice of Marie that Geneviève heard when she woke. The morning sunlight was brilliant, reflecting off the stark, white, unadorned walls of the bed-chamber. Geneviève put her hand to her eyes. Marie had not yet shuttered the windows, letting the last small cooling breeze circulate teasingly before the sun turned the day incandescent.

"Of course, Marie. I saw you before falling asleep last night." Her voice had an edge to it, which surprised her. She certainly shouldn't be rude to the people of this house after Monsieur Crevaux had so generously taken her in. But she felt irritated, and for some reason, not herself. "Please close the shutters, Marie, the light bothers me."

Smiling to herself, Marie began to pull in the shutters. The girl's testiness pleased her. It meant she was getting well, that her treatment had been successful.

"I'm hungry, Marie. Have I missed breakfast?" asked Geneviève, trying to soften her voice.

The small black woman latched the final shutter and adjusted the louvers. Trying to sound unconcerned, she said, "You should be hungry. You've missed breakfast for the past six days." She turned to see Geneviève's puzzled expression. "Feel your ribs and tell me if it isn't true."

Geneviève felt silly but she obeyed, her hand slipping under the heavy linen coverlet. She was amazed at the prominence of her bones. "But I remember nothing," she protested.

"My medicine is good," smiled Marie, patting the tiny

bulges under her apron. "The fever passed through you quicker than most."

Marie surprised everyone by requesting to become Geneviève's *cocotte*. Always before, she had been adamant in refusing to accept such a position, even though it was considered prestigious. A *cocotte* was subject to certain benefits simply because of her proximity to a white: better food, because she often ate privately with her mistress; better clothing, because she must appear smart next to her mistress; better education and the opportunity to travel, because she must remain with her mistress wherever she went. All of this was tempting to Marie, yet it was impossible because of her ancestry. She and Jean were descended from royalty; her mother had been queen of their small tribe in Africa, and wasn't she to follow in that position? But their lives had been drastically altered. Abducted and chained together, they had been forcibly marched to the sea and into the vile, odorous ships of the white slave traders. Their mother had died on the long, torturous passage. And the two children alone faced the greedy-eyed, absurdly dressed whites clamoring at the slave dock in Port-au-Prince.

Crevaux had been there that particular day, the first time in two years he had been forced into the disagreeable task of buying additional slaves. His purchases were over when he spotted the two wild-eyed children huddled together in a corner of the slave paddock. He bought them without hesitation. They were useless to him as a commodity, and somehow seemed an expiation for his more necessary purchases of human beings.

Taken to live in the kitchen compound with the house servants, they shocked and then amused everyone with their refusal to do any kind of work, however inconsequential. They couldn't imagine why anyone should ask them. Crevaux, for the very reason that he bought them, said that they should not be forced. Soon after learning the local language, however, they realized their position and consented to work. But they were choosy about what they would and would not do. And now Marie wanted to be a *cocotte*!

To Marie, there was nothing odd about her reasoning. She sensed something different in Geneviève, an air of challenge and strength. She was nothing like Crevaux's daughters;

hadn't the girl already helped Jean to kill a man? As her *cocotte*, Marie would be with her night and day. She would learn from her.

Geneviève knew by now that a *cocotte* was not merely a personal servant. She was also a companion and a confidante in all one's thoughts and problems. And the relationship was expected to be reciprocal as far as confidences went. Marie would be with her at all times. They would sleep in the same room and eat and drink together, except at the family table. Geneviève was pleased, for she also sensed something different in Marie. She possessed an aura of power. Her voice was usually obeyed and carried an authority she had never heard in a slave. Geneviève respected her.

The first week of her recovery, Geneviève was watched closely by Marie, who would let her do nothing more than go up and down the stairs once a day. Though she protested out of habit, it was all she really *wanted* to do in her present debilitated state. The days passed lazily with Madame Crevaux and her daughters, Thérèse and Michèle. They talked of fashions and needlepoint and, in a hopeless manner, of the young men they had met while visiting Paris. Marie would observe when Geneviève had had enough of idle talk and announce then that she must rest. Upstairs, she would be thanked for her timely rescue, and the two would laugh, drink lemonade and tell each other about their lives.

One day, Geneviève was lying in bed trying, unsuccessfully, to read. Unobserved, she began to watch Marie, who was sitting on the floor by the window, bathed in long, thin rods of sunlight coming through the louvered shutter. She was working with a mortar and pestle, slowly grinding away at some substance. The moving patterns of sunlight caressed her silky, raven skin. She was an inch or two shorter than Geneviève, but their bodies were remarkably similar. Her hair was cut short and close to her pert, round head. Wide eyes and partially opened, full lips maintained her nearly perpetual expression of inquisitiveness. Their relationship had developed quickly and naturally into friendship, but there was something that bothered Geneviève.

"Marie," she said pensively. "Monsieur Crevaux tells me you came to him in Seventeen Seventy-nine and that you were about eight years old at the time."

"Yes, *mademoiselle*."

"If that's so, then we're the same age. I don't know what it is, Marie, but I feel we were born near the same time. Do you think it's possible? Even on the same day?"

Marie continued to grind, but her forehead was creased in thought. Finally, she spoke. "If you've had these feelings, then it's so." She looked at Geneviève then and added, "It is very powerful."

"Yes, I think it might be. And because of this, I'd rather you didn't call me *mademoiselle*."

"Then what should I call you?"

"*Geneviève!*" She laughed, breaking the somberness. "It is my name, and I'd feel more comfortable hearing it from you."

Judson had been with Gaston Lacour, Father Gaston, for a week now and, although he should be extremely thankful that the man was going out of his way to accommodate him, it was all he could do to be civil. He could only think of how well his life had been going until he'd met Geneviève. Now he couldn't dismiss her image from his mind. One would imagine, he thought furiously, that he was in love with her. But what earthly good would that do, now that she despised him? His worry about her was constant, and to spend day after day in this sleepy outpost with no word was maddening.

Perhaps I am going mad, he thought soberly. Even André was doing his best to be free of his company; he managed every day to have some important task that called him away from the priest's house, returning only in time to eat with the servants and sleep. He had even taken up the silly Spanish custom of sleeping away half the day in siesta.

At twilight, as had become his habit, Judson walked to the town plaza merely to occupy his time. Many of the townspeople strolled the square at this time of evening. To Judson, they appeared to be sleepwalking. To them, he appeared a nervous, driven man. They saw his unnecessarily rapid pace, hands jammed rigidly into his pockets, and his perpetual scowl.

His recent, early dinner with Gaston sat heavily on his stomach. The priest was morbidly unimaginative with food. Every night there was either smoked pig or dried corned beef, and cassava or cornmeal bread drenched in cane syrup. He also had a proclivity for weighty after-dinner conversation

that Judson, guiltily, tried to escape. The priest was a good man, if not an interesting one, and he loved his brother enormously. Although he constantly railed Jean-Baptiste for his love of luxury, he was also proud of his clandestine work to change the conditions of life for the *gens de couleur* in Saint-Domingue.

Judson leaned against a walled fountain to watch the throngs. This was the antithesis of the hectic pace of French Saint-Domingue. He wondered how there could be such conflicting lifestyles on so small and isolated an island. There was wealth here, but it was not a driving force. The people carried on in a languorous air of luxury and romance, but the men's clothing, although of the finest materials, was much out of fashion. Neither did the women, many of them beautiful in a staid, inanimate way, seem to care about fashion. Their common attire was a black silk gown topped by a near waist-length shift. Their fine, long tresses were either braided or tied up around their foreheads with ribbon and further adorned with wild flowers and jewelry.

Not that it mattered. There could be no other woman for him now save Geneviève. Her bewitching green eyes haunted his dreams, and her body . . . Lord, how he ached for her! Pray God she was safe with Crevaux; he couldn't bear to think that she might again fall into d'Villiers' clutches. Someday, somehow, he must be reunited with her, must explain. . . .

Judson sighed. This long purgatory in Santo Domingo would not seem so hateful, if only he could be sure that Geneviève would again be his. Not as she had been the first time; no, he wanted her to come to him eagerly, lovingly . . . small chance of that! But he clung to a vague hope, a sense of a bond between them that he could hardly fathom. Yet, surely, this bond was not solely in his imagination? There was something about her. . . .

Geneviève had been at Pacifique for two and a half weeks. One morning, feeling a palpable wave of energy return to her, she asked if she might go riding. It was a day when the sky was deep blue and the trade winds swept so strongly across the island that the air seemed cool.

Under the vigorous protest of his wife, Crevaux took Geneviève on his daily round of the plantation. Madame



Crevaux had flushed at the thought of such absurd behavior. "The girl has not fully recovered," she argued, "and will surely suffer a relapse." But the final consultation was with Marie, who reservedly agreed to the outing. Crevaux assured his wife that he would watch Geneviève for signs of weakness, and thought that he might escort her home after an hour or so. But Geneviève stayed with him throughout the day. It was exhilarating to be astride a horse again, carefree under the sun. She had rested long enough.

Crevaux's face was animated with pride as he showed off his plantation. He took her through the slave quarters, which were neatly laid out in a grid pattern. There were white-washed wattle and daub huts for couples and families, and long, dormitory-style huts for single men and women. All the roofs were thatched tightly with coconut palm fronds. Nearby was the large stone and tile slave hospital of which he was especially proud, certainly for the fact that it was empty.

On a shady knoll, between the house and the slave quarters, was the sparsely occupied graveyard. The largest section was set aside for slaves. The family section had only two graves, the tiny one of a stillborn child, and the grave of a ship captain who had died of fever while visiting some years ago.

By noon, when they were visiting the outlying kitchen compound, Geneviève still had not tired. They stopped long enough to eat a convenient lunch of chicken legs and hot bread lavished with fresh butter. The long loaves had just come from the huge brick oven. Afterwards, they rode another mile to the sugar refinery. Like a small town, it was busy and noisy, and pungent with the aroma of distilling rum. The buildings were of stone or yellow brick. All were substantial, and most were belching either black smoke or steam. The grinding mill was operating not by mules but on wind power. There was a boiling house with a towering chimney, a curing house for the raw sugar, a cooperage to manufacture the storage kegs and a distillery that converted the by-product, molasses, into rum.

Geneviève's face was flushed and freckled from the sun when she appeared for dinner. She didn't notice the stares of the Crevaux women when she nodded again for the guinea hen in its delicious sour orange sauce. She had already taken not one, but two of the steaming lobster tails.

Crevaux, however, only picked at his dinner. His wide sun-tanned brow was knit in thought. Geneviève had not seen it so since the afternoon she had arrived. She knew he had talked to Jean before dinner, so perhaps it had to do with plantation business.

Georges, Crevaux's son, who had just returned from a long weekend in Port-au-Prince, ate without joining the conversation. He kept glancing at his father as though expecting to be addressed at any moment.

"I've received word," Crevaux began as he dropped his fork on the table and abandoned the pretense of eating, "of your newly established friendship with the notorious Monsieur Bouche. My supreme disappointment notwithstanding, I must tell you now that he most certainly will not be allowed to attend this ball."

Crevaux had a longstanding commitment to hold an elaborate ball on the coming weekend. Naturally, Geneviève could not attend because she was in hiding. They would have called it off out of deference to her, but the invitations had been sent out months ago and it would seem odd to cancel the affair for no obvious reason.

Georges gushed the response he had prepared. "But, father! I've only just met the man. You could hardly call it a friendship. My friends and I were having our usual dinner at the Black Parrot and he simply thrust himself upon us, planting himself at our table and ordering several bottles of the most expensive wine. He seemed abjectly lonely."

"I shouldn't wonder that he was lonely. Who in his right mind would associate willingly with the man?"

"Alphonse," broke in Madame Crevaux, a bit too loudly, "Tell us about Geneviève's tour of the plantation."

Ignoring her, Crevaux turned to Geneviève. "This vile miscreant, with whom my son saw fit to share a table, has recently become the object of a government investigation for purported crimes against his slaves. Can you imagine what *he* must do, when the conduct of the Comte de Villiers and others like him never comes into question? This twisted young man is in control of one of the largest plantations in this area—it borders mine—and since his father's death he's made a ruin of it. The slaves of Château Bouche die by the hundreds each year. What poor ones survive are so constantly tortured that they've no time to work and there are no profits.

It's said the boy's only income is from selling the gold he pries up from the *louis d'or* inlaid floor of his entrance hall!" Crevaux threw up his hands in a gesture of futility.

"Alphonse!" admonished Madame Crevaux. "This conversation is not suitable over dinner. I must ask you to stop it."

Crevaux's fist slammed to the table, causing a slight quake. "Why not? Why should we whisper about such things? May my hopes turn to ashes if my own son should . . ."

Madame Crevaux's narrowed eyes finally stopped him, and after a long moment he mumbled an apology. There was an uncomfortable silence at the table and Geneviève felt called upon to fill it. "Monsieur Crevaux," she said, "tell me about your family's year in France. I've always yearned to go there."

Crevaux glanced at the faces around the table and poured himself another glass of wine. "There isn't much to tell, Geneviève. We didn't find what we expected; it wasn't as we remembered. Our château was damp and drafty and we all suffered intolerably from colds. We returned because this is our home. We will die here."

His stark words cast another pall over the diners. Finally, out of desperation, Thérèse asked, "Please, may we talk about the ball?"

"Thérèse. You know that Geneviève won't be able to attend the ball."

"But, mother! I was only trying . . ."

"I would love to hear about the ball," interrupted Geneviève gently.

At that point, to everyone's relief, Crevaux came out of his black mood and made an announcement. "I have decided on an excellent plan for Geneviève. Since she can't risk being seen by overly inquisitive guests, she should spend the night away from the house."

"But where, Alphonse?"

"The Hill Cottage. I'm having it repaired and provisioned. Accompanied by Jean and Marie, she may find it an outing of sorts."

"It sounds like fun," agreed Geneviève, noticing Madame Crevaux's frown.

"Yes, and it will be absolutely safe," continued Crevaux. "You'll be able to see for miles around. A few years ago, I kept it occupied by some of my men as an outpost against the *marrons*. If they saw any activity, they fired off a small cannon

to warn us of a possible *marron* raid. It worked very effectively."

"*Marrons*?" questioned Geneviève.

"Runaway slaves. The word means a domesticated animal run wild. Any slave who managed to escape sought refuge immediately in the wild terrain of the mountains. They banded together, chose their own leaders, and when they needed something the mountains couldn't provide, they raided the plantations for it. It was a difficult situation for a long while, but now our government has an agreement with them. We recognized their freedom and gave them their own land. They, in turn, agreed to accept the authority of the King and to behave themselves—which they have. You'll be perfectly safe up there. There are *marrons* living in the mountains who are old, even three-quarters of a century old. They were born of runaway slaves and have never known slavery."

Geneviève was intrigued.

Early on the day of the ball, Geneviève set out with Jean and Marie for Hill Cottage. Marie was nervous because Geneviève insisted that she ride horseback, something Marie had never done before though she desired to learn. They arrived within three hours, twice the time it would have taken had Marie not demanded a leisurely pace.

The cottage was perched in a small meadow scooped naturally out of the steep mountainside that rose behind. The cottage was constructed of stone and had deeply set windows. There were four doors, two for each of its two rooms. The roof was newly thatched, the tile floors sparkled, and the larder was stocked with food. Nestled up against one side of the cottage was a huge rose bush, grown wild and leggy. Two large urns for the collection of rainwater flanked the front doors.

The view from the cottage caused Geneviève to clasp her arms around herself in happiness. Falling away before her, in myriad shades of green, was the descending slope of forest, the flat plain of the Cul-de-Sac, more mountains and, beyond them, the sweeping turquoise-blue of the sea.

Alone, Geneviève cried aloud, "This is wonderful." Jean was seeing to the horses and Marie had disappeared stiffly inside. The unhampered trade winds swept her hair back from her smiling, contented face. "I should like to live in a place such as this."

## *Chapter 11*

Alphonse Crevaux and his son, Georges, stood at the open entrance doors of their home. Outside, on the smooth sand and shell carriageway, a group of liverymen awaited the first arrivals. Just behind them, on the lawn, a string quartet sat languidly with their instruments in their laps. They had been instructed to begin playing at the signal of a waving flag. A boy waiting at the entrance gates was to run to a knoll and wave the flag as soon as he spotted the first carriage. The guests would hear the music before they came in sight of the house.

Thanks to Crevaux's insistence, the ball would be kept manageable by a guest list limited to people they genuinely liked. His particular sensitivities eliminated many of his fellow planters. There was to be only one government official—a distant relation from France—and his large family from town. The remaining guests would include his three planter friends and their wives and elder children, married and unmarried. There would be only thirty guests.

The evening had cooled pleasantly and Crevaux, aided by two stiff brandies, appeared calm. To his intense relief, he saw the boy wave the flag and, on signal, the music began. The sooner it began, the sooner it would be over. For all he said to the contrary, the ball was to him a yearly task that only proved enjoyable when he had had just the right amount of drink. Catérine claimed it to be one of the highlights of her

year, second only to Christmas. In reality, she enjoyed the lengthy, elaborate preparations but was too nervous at the actual event to enjoy herself. Crevaux looked forward to tomorrow, when she would be noticeably more relaxed.

When Catérine heard the quartet strike up, her nerves betrayed her. A moan escaped her lips and she allowed her *cocotte* to gently pat away the glistening waterbeads from her face. She looked over the *cocotte's* head to survey the ballroom one last time before the guests descended upon her. She thought it looked right. The huge room was further opened by a number of doors that led onto the rear terrace and lawn. Delicately light, this room was the only one on the ground floor not paneled in mahogany. The walls were painted an oystershell white and decorated with friezes, as was the high ceiling. The several large floor-to-ceiling mirrors produced an illusion of even greater spaciousness.

The far end of the room was set up for the twelve-piece orchestra, which was to play in turns of six so there would be no lapses in the program. Along one side of the rectangular room was a long, linen-covered table, flanked at each end by two massive silver bowls, one for a plum-colored coconut punch, the other for the champagne punch. Between the two bowls were row upon row of wine bottles and crystal-stemmed glasses. Against the opposite wall was the long, groaning table of food. Fanning out from the roast suckling pig in its center were delicacies of every conceivable kind and color.

Thérèse and Michèle presided over the upstairs, where the women went upon arrival to settle themselves and change into their evening attire. Throwing aside their dusty traveling clothes in gay abandon, they soon caused the rooms to resemble the aftermath of a whimsical tornado.

The men went immediately to the punch table, where they added subtly to the decoration of the room. They wore predominately white satin dress suits with tight-fitting breeches and handsomely embroidered waistcoats. Gold and silver ornamental figures—"clocks"—adorned their white silk stockings and were repeated on the lace of their jabots and wrist ruffles. Some wore wigs of the hedgehog cut but most were wigless, with their hair curled in simple rolls over the ears.

When the women descended, they added the splash of color that was lacking. The gowns were of solid, striped and

painted satins, ornamented further with ribbons, puffs, loops and garlands of flowers.

Just as the carriages arrived at Pacifique, fitted out with the most sprightly horses and the newest liveries, the slaves of Château Bouche gathered in agitated silence over the cold bodies of their white field guards. They had known since noon, when there were whispered instructions among them not to drink the water, that something ominous was about to happen. Now, they looked to their new leader, Pompey, for what to do next.

Pompey, whose deformed right arm had saved him from field labor and relegated him to water carrier. Pompey, who had had two good arms in Africa with which to exercise his freedom as a hunter. Pompey, the man of revenge who had introduced the sap of the manchineel tree into the drinking water and seen to it that the guards as a group drank it when their ration of rum mysteriously failed to appear at the appointed time. Pompey now incited the slaves with shouts and calls for revenge and led them toward the great house of Château Bouche.

Young Bouche, who was in an upper room of the house with two of his mistresses, happened to look out the window and saw the slaves advancing upon the house. He was exceedingly drunk, but managed to escape by a back door and ride quickly away. No one saw him leave, and he had warned no one else in the house. Because it was yet daylight and the setting sun was imparting a rosy glow to the sky, the flames that consumed the house went unnoticed, and no alarm was sounded.

When Crevaux announced the fireworks, everyone spilled noisily out onto the patio and lawn. They were entranced for a full half-hour by the dazzling display of exploding rockets. They thought it was the finest exhibition they had ever witnessed outside of Paris, and Crevaux beamed as he acknowledged their praise. He remained outside when the rest returned to the glowing ballroom at the renewed urging of the orchestra. He felt much more relaxed now. The fireworks had been a great success. He hated fireworks, and now he accepted gladly the comfort of the silence and the night sky's more impressive display of stars.

Just as he was on the verge of enjoying himself, Crevaux thought suddenly that the silence was unnatural. He had given permission for the slaves to have their own celebration tonight in honor of the ball in the big house. He glanced toward the quarters where, by all rights, there should be an on-going clamor of drums and raised voices. Yet, he could hear nothing, not even one drum. It was all very odd, and he thought it bore investigation. He returned to the ballroom to advise Catérine of his whereabouts.

He had just drawn her aside when the music came to an abrupt halt. There followed an audible gasp from the guests. At first, Crevaux could see nothing. Then, as the dancers silently swept back to give it room, he saw a horse striding down the center of the ballroom.

"What in God's name . . . ?" hissed Crevaux as his wife grasped his arm in alarm.

"The floor, Alphonse," exclaimed Catérine, too shock to say anything else. "He's ruining the floor."

It was young Bouche who sat unsteadily upon the horse. His eyes were unfocused from too much drink, but he rode slowly to the punch table and, nearly losing his seat altogether, leaned over to grab a bottle of wine. Above the astonished eyes of Crevaux's guests, he turned up the bottle and drank greedily from it, spilling most of its contents down the front of his already soiled waistcoat. His body suddenly convulsed and he let the bottle fall to the floor, where it exploded into tiny fragments. The sound of breaking glass seemed to sober him. His eyes flashed as he searched the many staring faces for Crevaux's. When he spotted him, he offered a sinister smile and bowed deeply.

"Forgive my appearance, Monsier Crevaux," he said in a slurred voice, "but, you see, I had no time to change into . . . *suitable* attire, for . . . I was required to make haste in . . . my *departure*. . . ." His mind and his grip failed him at that point, and he fell limply and gracelessly into a crumpled heap upon the ballroom floor.

While everyone stared at the unconscious boy, Crevaux searched furiously for Georges. He reasoned that his son had invited Bouche in spite of his warning. The look of panic in Georges' face should have advised him that this was not so. Still, Crevaux grabbed him by the shoulders and rasped through clenched teeth that he was to remove his wretched



friend and horse from the floor and then see to his mother, who was most probably in a faint by now. "You will pay dearly for this, Georges," he added.

The frightened boy extricated himself from his father's grip and ran to do what he could. Crevaux looked again at the confusion and decided that in his present frame of mind he was helpless to do anything about it. He sighed, waved extravagantly to the orchestra to resume playing, and escaped through the nearest door.

He walked to the far edge of the lawn and stopped in the darkness to permit the intense pressure in his head to subside. He tried to calm himself by making a firm decision to get away forever from Saint-Domingue. To flee to any other place on the earth. Anywhere, no matter how drab or poor, would be a relief from this island. He only hoped it was not too late. His thoughts drifted back to the slaves, and he remembered that he must visit the quarters. He made his way by a circuitous route to allow himself more time alone.

Crevaux never feared to walk alone among his slaves. Tonight he entered the quarters from the rear and walked confidently past the first rows of dark empty huts. Of course, they would all be gathered elsewhere for the festivities, yet he was becoming increasingly alarmed at the absence of noise—any noise. When he turned into the main section of dormitories, he halted and saw what in his worst fears he had dared not imagine. From the faint glow of the dying cookfires, he saw the corpses of at least a hundred slaves strewn grotesquely about the grounds.

A baby, sitting near the center of the bodies, cried fitfully, tears streaking its dusty, tiny, naked body. Nearby, a woman lay face down in the sandy earth, her arm struck stiffly in the act of reaching out to her endangered child. Crevaux, too, reached out, to steady himself against the side of a hut. His body shuddered involuntarily from fear and repulsion at the scene before him and the terrible apprehension of what he knew was to come.

His eyes lifted slowly toward the gaily lit windows of the house in the distance. Faint strains of music drifted eerily across the field. When he heard the first ungodly screams of the surprised guests, he fell to his knees and crossed himself.

There was no reasoning in the thoughts that now raced through his head. He felt a macabre embarrassment that his guests would think the slaves about to kill them belonged to

him, Alphonse Crevaux. But mine are dead, his thoughts protested. Willing himself to his feet, he stumbled forward erratically and began to run toward the house. "*They're not my slaves.*" he cried. "*My slaves would not do this.*"

"The house!" cried Geneviève, running into the cottage. "Pacifique is on fire!"

She had remained outside in the dark after the three of them had watched the miniature explosions of the fireworks from their mountaintop vantage point. The night breeze had been so refreshing that she was not ready to leave it for the stuffy confines of the cottage and bed.

She could feel the excitement of the distant ball and experienced pangs of jealousy that she could not attend. She admonished herself for such feelings, for how could she be happier anywhere on this island than where she was? Here she was *safe*. That held a new and wonderful meaning for her after the experiences of the past few weeks. It was strange that during her life in Savannah she had sought excitement, adventure, perhaps even danger. Then, suddenly, there had been too much of it, more than she could handle. She had changed, that she knew. Her life would have to be planned along vastly different lines.

There would be no Seth, nor his home, nor his children. She could never marry him now, not after two men had . . . Seth would insist, but she wouldn't have it. How absurd it all was! Especially now, when she had come to know desire. As much as she tried to avoid it, the image of Judson Talbot appeared in her mind. She found herself wondering where he was and what he was doing. True, he had saved her once, but he had also condemned her. She would never think of him again. She would never think of any man. The feeling of being alone was intriguing now. Alone, she felt stronger, more adventurous. Marie's was the only company she really enjoyed now. They were alike in many ways. Like her, Marie had decided never to marry, for she could never marry outside her tribe. The thought that perhaps they could go to Savannah together cheered Geneviève. They would comfort each other, and there would be Rachel to care for, and the plantation.

As she mulled over these things, Geneviève looked out over the Cul-de-Sac and the lights from the sugar refineries. It was then that she saw the glow where Pacifique should be.

Was it just the brightly lit windows from the ball? No, this light was different, much brighter. It looked like the light from a great fire. She felt her chest tighten in fear. It was a fire, and it could only be the great house of Pacifique!

Marie and Jean were shocked when she ran up to them screaming. They tried to calm her. It couldn't be so, they insisted. It was only more fireworks, or a bonfire in the slave quarters. But they followed Geneviève outside to see for themselves. They stiffened when they saw it, glowing even brighter now. Marie came to stand by Geneviève while Jean ran for his saddle. He was ready in a few moments.

"Jean," asked Geneviève hesitantly, "could it possibly be the sugar factory?"

"Perhaps, *mademoiselle*. Or perhaps the fireworks set brush on fire. I'll see."

Jean rode fast, urging his horse toward Pacifique. He knew, as they all did, that it was the house. And he knew he would be too late to help in any way. Had it been a candle . . . or the fireworks . . . ? Gnawing at him was the feeling that this was more than an accident. Otherwise, he would have hesitated to leave Geneviève and Marie alone, for it had been Crevaux's express orders not to leave them under any circumstances.

When he drew up into the cover of the tall oleanders at the edge of the lawn, he saw that he was much too late. The house was gone, fallen in on itself. A few flames still lapped up spasmodically from the embers.

Jean did not run. Instead, he dismounted and pulled himself and his heavily breathing horse further into the bushes. From there he watched the small group of white men gathered near the charred remains. He did not recognize them. They were talking animatedly, and when two more men came riding in from the direction of the slave quarters, they all mounted and rode away. Having listened for a long while to make sure they had gone, Jean led his horse slowly toward the house. He had walked only a few paces when a voice called out to him. Someone was running toward him, but it was not until the man was upon him that he recognized one of Pacifique's slaves. It was the husband of one of the house servants, and he looked extremely relieved to see Jean.

"What is it? What's happened?" asked Jean.

The man opened his mouth, but no words came out. He appeared confused.

"Crevaux, is he dead?"

The man nodded quickly.

"Everyone?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"Slaves."

Jean's heart leaped into his throat, but he tried to remain outwardly calm for the sake of the man. "What slaves? Not from here?"

"No, they killed us too. My wife . . ."

"You must tell me now what has happened," pressed Jean, placing his hand on the man's shoulder.

The man was shaking with fear, his voice jerking out the words as he told Jean how they had rushed in on them, unheard because of the fireworks. They had already killed the guards. Frenzied and carrying rum bottles, they claimed to have burned Château Bouche and killed the whites there. Now they would kill all whites and free all slaves.

"They said we must join the killing," explained the slave, "but we were afraid of them. We had no weapons. They began to kill us and some joined out of fear. Many of us ran to hide. We watched them attack the house and could hear the screams. They even killed the servants. My wife was there. They burned the house with the dead inside."

Jean listened, not wanting to hear. But he knew he must act, for there was no time to lose. "We'll have to be quick," he told the man. "The whites will return soon with more men and they, too, will be in a killing mood. Any black face will do for them. Are there others?"

"Yes." He pointed toward the trees.

"Good. Gather them together and search the quarters. Find as many as you can and go into the mountains. Do you know of Hill Cottage?"

"Yes," he said, and anxiously added, "will we be safe?"

"Go by the trail to Hill Cottage. I'll meet you there and we'll go together."

Jean felt a metallic taste in his mouth as he returned up the mountain to Geneviève and Marie. His thoughts jumped about crazily, and he could bring none of them to a conclusion. He was a free man now, but at an awful expense. So many murders, so much blood. And free for what? What could freedom on this island mean for him? He could only be truly free within his tribe, and his tribe no longer existed.

Crevaux had owned him but did not treat him badly, not like some of the masters. Now Crevaux was dead, and he was free, and not free. He must hide now as if he had murdered Crevaux himself. A slave uprising was the most disastrous event that could occur on Saint-Domingue. Any slave who even knew what went on tonight was a dead slave as far as the whites were concerned. The remaining slaves of Pacifique must hide forever, and he and Marie were slaves of Pacifique. The girl, Geneviève, would go with them, for she, too, was hiding, and had nowhere else to go now. There was no time for sorrow tonight.

The slaves who appeared at Hill Cottage later that night wore tired, defeated expressions. They carried their meager possessions in sacks slung over their shoulders. Even the children and babies were too tired to cry.

Jean could not believe his eyes. There had been three hundred slaves at Pacifique. Fifty now stood before him in the darkness.

## Chapter 12

The two fashionable carriages halted before the home of Patrice Liguad. Though the Liguad house was located in one of the busier areas of Port-au-Prince, it was among the most attractive dwellings in the city. Tall and narrow, its white facade sported black shutters and arched double doorways stained a rosy orange. An ornate, black, wrought-iron balcony projected from the second story to circle the walls on three sides. The steep-pitched roof was of orange tile, to complement the doorways. Shading the balcony from the sun, a flamboyant tree dropped its brilliant blossoms to the walkway below.

Simone Bourget glanced out of the window of her carriage and sighed with envy. She had always fancied the house of Madame Liguad. Though the two women had been friends for years, each thought the other more fortunate. Patrice had attained with comparative ease what Simone had so desperately sought from d'Binet—marriage to a *grand blanc*. Dantès Liguad had taken his young Patrice to France, having purchased for her a *lettre-patent* proclaiming her white. They had lived a life of gaiety and leisure until Liguad was killed in a duel. Patrice, who found France dull and cold after the loss of her young husband, had returned to Saint-Domingue. She had also found that the years in France had left her husband deeply in debt. Using her remaining income, she had bought

the house in Port-au-Prince. With the help of several young girls to execute her designs, she had established her reputation as a consummate dressmaker to the elite of the colony. On the strength of her *lettre-patent*, she was considered white and thus was allowed to own a business.

Yes, Simone thought, Patrice has had all the luck. But still, she couldn't envy her too much. Madame Ligaud was a true friend and Simone felt that she had never before needed one so badly.

Simone adjusted her headscarf and took up her parasol.

"Margrit, we should go in now. Please see if Claudette intends to leave the security of her carriage. *Bon Dieu*, she is slow to move, that one."

Margrit giggled at her mistress's irritation. She knew that Madame Bourget was not truly angry. Claudette Rabeau had been Simone's girlhood friend and they remained close, though Claudette's maddening habit of forever being late grated on Simone's nerves.

The gentle, childlike Claudette was also a *femme de couleur*, but of even lighter complexion than Simone. Her pale hair and blue eyes made Claudette a celebrated beauty in Port-au-Prince. She had for several years been the mistress of a *grand blanc*, Jean Maloire, who much preferred her company to that of his wife and family.

Simone and Claudette met frequently at Patrice's home, where they were served a dainty meal in the elegant courtyard garden while they made selections to replenish their wardrobes. Here, the three women shared the problems unique to *femmes de couleur* and enjoyed a bit of choice gossip as well.

The women stepped down from their carriages, their *cocottes* walking ahead to clear a path for them through the crowds. Laughing and chattering, Simone and Claudette embraced before the courtyard gate. Simone wore a coral-colored gown, Claudette wore yellow. The two made a lovely picture as the flamboyant blossoms fell about them.

Elisabeth, Claudette's *cocotte*, rang the small brass bell attached to the courtyard gate. They were admitted by a servant, who smiled at the flurry of laughter and ruffles as the women rushed to embrace their hostess.

They found their places around a linen-covered table, beneath the shade of a flowering almond tree. The sweet fragrance of jasmine filled the air, and roses, bougainvillea

and camellia bloomed in a riot of color along the garden walls.

Simone sipped from her wine glass and listened to the voices of her friends. How pleasant this is, she thought. For the first time in weeks, she felt at ease.

"I have news that I wish to share with you, my friends," Claudette announced, breaking into Simone's reverie. "I am *enceinte*."

Patrice and Simone exchanged glances.

"Have you told Jean of this, Claudette?" Simone asked. For the first time, Simone noticed the lavender shadows beneath her friend's eyes.

"*Non*, I haven't told him. But, I know he'll be pleased."

"But, Claudette, didn't you tell us that Jean's family insists that he return to France very soon? If he goes, you'll be left alone with a child. This isn't good, *ma chère petite*." Patrice frowned.

"I don't care, Patrice. Really, I don't believe he'll go. But if he does, I'll have his child, if nothing else."

"Don't play the fool, Claudette. He'll go if his family insists. What you must do is to see that he provides for you and the child." Simone's voice softened as she looked into Claudette's large blue eyes. "I don't wish to be harsh, Claudette, but you must think of the child. You weren't careful, eh? Or did you seek this little one?"

Claudette's lashes dropped. "Perhaps I wanted a child, Simone. I fear that Jean will leave, as Guy-Pierre left you. Now, you've done well. I admire you. But, for me, there is only Jean. I'm not as strong as you."

The women fell silent, each absorbed in her own thoughts.

"And you, Simone," Patrice asked. "Is it true what I've heard of the Comte d'Villiers' behavior toward you?"

"What you heard is true." Simone plucked at the embroidered tablecloth with her long, golden fingers. "Only last week, he forced his way past Margrit to enter the house. He was drunk, of course. He's a vicious man in the best of circumstances, but when he's full of brandy, he's despicable. It seems he blames me for losing the girl, Geneviève. This is the root of his vengeful behavior. Though he also holds me responsible for the pretty little scar Judson Talbot bestowed upon him."

Simone laughed merrily. "When he's angry, the scar glows a bright pink. It's most trying to conceal my amusement from



the comte over his new disfigurement." The women giggled at the Comte d'Villiers' certain fury.

"But in other respects, his behavior doesn't amuse me," Simone continued. "It was during his last visit that he picked up a porcelain figurine, a shepherdess that Guy-Pierre had given me, and dashed it to the floor, shattering it to bits."

"He's a beast," Claudette agreed angrily. "But what does he say to you during his visits?"

Simone shrugged, feigning indifference. "He curses me, of course. He's enraged because Judson Talbot publicly humiliated him, and the girl, too. He can't accept that anyone has bested him."

"Can't you do anything, Simone?"

"It will pass, I suppose." Simone's eyes darkened with anger. "If it doesn't—then, we shall see. Actually, his visits have advantages."

"Oh, Simone, how could that be?" Claudette asked, astonished.

"Claudette, the Comte d'Villiers possesses an iron control when he's sober. But, when he's drunk enough brandy, he becomes maudlin and careless. If one listens to his drunken ravings, more than a little information can be gained." A sly smile played about Simone's mouth. She was thinking of the comte's last visit and his talk of the slave rebellion in the Cul-de-Sac. Because she had listened with care, she was, no doubt, one of the few in Port-au-Prince who knew Crevaux's plantation house was burned by marauding slaves. The plantation owners would deny the event. They always denied any problem with the slaves. Had they not squelched the gossip regarding last year's poisoning of the Caron family?

"Please, Simone," Claudette begged prettily, "what did the comte say? Tell us."

Simone laughed. "It's not for your ears, my friend. You'd run straight to Jean, and by nightfall all of Port-au-Prince would be the wiser."

"That's unfair," Claudette pouted. "I'm always the last to know the intrigues here."

"It's your own fault, Claudette," Patrice replied, laughing. "If you'd leave your bedchamber from time to time, you'd perhaps be better informed, *non?*"

"Yes," Simone said, joining the laughter. "Isn't this your first outing in several weeks?"

"You are both horrid. What you say isn't true. Jean insists that I take the air once each day." Claudette blushed.

"But of course. Jean must have a respite from you, shameless as you are," Patrice countered.

Peals of laughter rose from the garden at this remark. But the women embraced Claudette to take the sharp edge off their teasing, and Claudette quickly joined in the merriment.

As the shadows lengthened in the courtyard, the women finished their wine, and gathered their parcels and parasols to leave. Arm in arm, they left the fragrant sanctuary of the garden for the heat and noise of the street. Their faces were soft and dreamy from good wine and laughter with close friends. Elisabeth and Margrit cleared the way for their mistresses, who followed holding their skirts close to avoid the dust and dirt of the streets. Simone was the first to notice that Margrit's slim back had gone rigid and that she had fallen back a step.

"Margrit, what is it?" Simone asked, grasping the *cocotte's* arm.

Margrit did not answer but nodded toward the carriages.

"*Dieu*," Simone said softly to Claudette, "It is the Comte d'Villiers."

Claudette's small mouth pursed in distress when she saw d'Villiers leaning against Simone's carriage. He was accompanied by two *grand blancs* of unsavory reputation.

"Claudette, this will be unpleasant, I think. You and Elisabeth go back to Patrice. Quickly, now."

"No, Simone, I won't leave you," Claudette said, trembling.

"You are *enceinte*. You must not be foolish. Please go." Simone took Margrit's arm and together they walked toward the carriage.

"Madame Bourget, *non*? I insisted to my friends that this is the carriage of the elegant Madame Bourget. They didn't believe that I spoke the truth. How could it be, they said, that this fine carriage could belong to a *femme de couleur*?"

Simone was close enough to see d'Villiers' florid complexion and to notice the smirks of his friends as he insulted her. She glanced behind her and saw that a crowd was gathering to watch this amusement.

When she neared the carriage, d'Villiers stepped directly in front of her. His eyes were filled with hatred. Simone felt

Margrit tremble. She squeezed the *cocotte's* arm to give her courage.

"Let me pass, *monsieur*," Simone said quietly.

"Is it usual for *gens de couleur* to give orders, Simone? I think not. Perhaps your memory should be refreshed."

In one swift motion, d'Villiers grasped the coral scarf that formed Simone's elaborate headdress and wrenched it from her. He studied the length of jeweled silk in his hand before dropping it to the ground, and grinding it slowly into the dirt with his boot.

Margrit cried out in horror. The tears streamed down her face as she put her arms around her mistress to guide her into the carriage. Simone, quiet and pale, made no move to defend herself. As they drove away, the laughter of d'Villiers and his friends followed them.

"Oh, *madame*, I could kill him," Margrit sobbed, as she held Simone's hands tightly.

To disarrange the traditional headdress of a *femme de couleur* was the ultimate insult. The headdress was considered sacred by these women. D'Villiers was aware of the magnitude of his insult.

"*Madame*, it's over now. Please, speak to me," Margrit begged Simone. She chafed the woman's cold hands and spoke soothingly to her as they drove through the streets.

When they reached the house, Margrit tenderly helped her mistress inside. She was frightened to see Simone in such a state. Generally, if insulted, Simone would react with anger, but now there was no evidence of her fiery temper. She seemed, Margrit noted, almost fragile.

Margrit no longer envied her mistress as she had before Guy-Pierre left the island. She had seen too clearly in the past few years the problems that beset the hostess of a salon. The *cocotte* felt safe in her role as confidante and was willing to forego the privileges Simone possessed. The envy she had felt had become sympathy, and fierce protectiveness toward her mistress.

"*Madame*, you should rest," Margrit said. She helped Simone remove her gown, then held a soft, blue robe for her.

"Bring brandy and a glass, Margrit. Then come and sit beside me," Simone whispered, while Margrit settled the pillows behind her dark hair.

Simone sipped the brandy as Margrit sat beside her bed.

Color returned to her face as she drank the amber liquid, but her eyes remained haunted.

"After today's incident I don't believe I can remain on this island, Margrit." Simone's voice was strained as she spoke, and her face appeared haggard.

"But people will forget, *madame*," Margrit said. "With the next scandal, no one will speak of today's occurrence."

"No, Margrit, it isn't only today's humiliation. Living in Saint-Domingue has become a misery." Her voice broke as she accepted another brandy from the *cocotte*.

"We *gens de couleur* are allowed no dignity. We are given no protection. Oh, yes, you think I'm a wealthy woman—that makes the difference. Wealth means nothing, Margrit. Does wealth prevent the Comte d'Villiers from entering my home at will to attack me? No, my real wealth is hatred; of hatred I possess an abundance. But, after a time, even this doesn't sustain me."

"But you're an influential woman, Madame Bourget. You have friends among the *grands blancs* who would gladly grant any favor."

"Ah, how naïve you are. Not for one moment would these fine friends defend me against one of their own. So long as I please, I will be tolerated." Simone's speech had begun to blur from the brandy, but she defiantly poured more into her glass.

"Yes, my fine friends," she scoffed. "How long have I been pleasing them? I was fourteen when it began. To the most despicable of these planters, I have been charming, Margrit. I've catered to their tastes and whims, heard their troubles. Each day, haven't I chosen my most delightful gowns to please their eyes? Doesn't my salon provide the best wines from France and the most beautiful girls of Saint-Domingue? But Simone Bourget hasn't pleased sufficiently to avoid being degraded on a public street. No, Simone Bourget is only a *femme de couleur*."

Simone's voice had risen to the sharp pitch of hysteria. Margrit stroked her hand and spoke calmly to her.

"Madame, it's Comte d'Villiers who's done this to you, not all of the patrons of your salon. Surely, if you avenge this insult, all will be put right."

"Yes, he'll regret this day, Margrit. But if I should act now, all eyes would be upon me. The time will come—mark me. D'Villiers will pay."

"In what way?"

Simone laughed harshly. "Love will destroy him, Margrit. Yes, *love*," she spat. "It will be his downfall as it's been mine. For the sake of love I became a murderess. Yes, Margrit, it's true. Now the comte's obsession with this girl will, in time, ruin him also. I know his feelings well. He's devoured by thoughts of her every moment of every day. This Geneviève has consumed him as Guy-Pierre once consumed me."

The *cocotte* watched Simone's eyelids flutter and slowly close in sleep. She looked down at the long lashes against the soft, golden cheeks and wondered how one so beautiful could fail to obtain her every wish. Margrit shook her head sadly as she arranged the comforter around Simone's slender form.

Long after Guy-Pierre had left Saint-Domingue, Simone had believed he would return. She had grown thin and irritable waiting for a response to the letters she wrote to him in Savannah. He had never answered. Margrit had begged Simone to accept the many invitations she received from wealthy planters, but the girl would see no one. Eventually, word reached them that d'Binet had married. For weeks following the news, Margrit had feared to leave Simone's presence, thinking she might take her life. Slowly, Simone recovered. Though she often spoke of d'Binet she agreed to accept an invitation from an admirer occasionally, and Margrit felt easier about her. The *cocotte* didn't know that Simone had not yet relinquished hope of Guy-Pierre's return. In her heart, Simone denied the possibility that he could be content with anyone other than herself.

Nearly five years to the day after Guy-Pierre had left, Margrit came upon Simone in a mood of feverish intensity. "Margrit," the girl said, "Guy-Pierre will never return to me. I know that now."

Margrit was astonished at Simone's declaration. Had her mistress not yet forgotten the young Frenchman? She hadn't spoken his name in months.

"That one is gone, but no matter. There are many handsome young men who desire you," the *cocotte* replied.

"You don't understand. If he doesn't want me, he can't be allowed to live with someone else. Long ago I told Guy-Pierre I would kill him if he loved another woman. The time has come to make good my promise. Only the question of how it will be done remains. I'll find a way."

It was to be two more years before Simone found a way.

Following the conversation with Margrit, Simone had indulged in a frenzied round of parties. With her smoldering beauty and her unattainable air, she whet the appetite of every man she encountered. Her popularity provided the clients she needed to establish her own salon. The incentive was provided by the rapidly dwindling funds Guy-Pierre had left her.

Simone had lived well in the last few years. Her household expenses were enormous and the exquisite gowns she favored were costly. The sum left by d'Binet would have provided ample income for a modest lifestyle, but only the wealthiest gentry could have lived as Simone without finding themselves deeply in debt. It was a desperate time for her. With the determination that she would not sink into poverty, she established the salon, then cast about for an even greater income.

During this time, Simone first heard of Jacques Argo. She had, while attending the guests of her salon, developed the habit of eavesdropping on the gentlemen's conversations. Thinking her disinterested in these matters, the planters talked freely of their business arrangements in her presence. In this way, Simone had discovered that the income of the elite was not derived solely from their plantations. Smuggling was a popular enterprise, and it was lucrative as well.

"Jacques Argo, he's your man," a young planter had remarked. "A scoundrel he is—a *petit blanc* of little means and less scruples. He owns a small, shallow-draft sloop—a very maneuverable craft. He's a good boatman. He's well-acquainted with the coast near Charleston and Savannah."

Jacques Argo. Simone remembered the name. The following day, she sent a message to the waterfront for Argo. That evening, after darkness had fallen, he rode into the courtyard of her house. She was disgusted with his appearance; indeed, she disliked everything about the man, except the money that he could make for her.

Argo despised Simone at once. This was inevitable. He was a *petit blanc* possessed of very little standing or property in Saint-Domingue. This lesser class of Frenchmen hated and envied the *gens de couleur* for their refinement and wealth. They were enraged that a person of mixed racial background could afford a better way of life than they. Argo ground his teeth at this woman's impudence, but his greed overwhelmed his prejudice. Thus began a profitable rum smuggling enter-

prise for the unlikely duo of Jacques Argo and Simone Bourget.

Simone had not forgotten about Jacques' knowledge of the coast of Savannah. This particular coastline held more significance than the fact that Jacques delivered the contraband rum there. She had learned that Guy-Pierre d'Binet had bought a small island near Savannah called Jasper's Landing. She asked Jacques if he knew of such an island. He answered yes, but gave Simone a look so filled with speculation that she had prudently refrained from questioning him further.

Simone intended to use the *petit blanc* to her own ends, but she was clever enough to know she could not pay him to murder Guy-Pierre. If he sensed the possibility for blackmail, his demands would never end. It would be necessary to keep Jacques within her control, to watch him and wait. Given the man's temperament, Simone was sure the wait would not be long.

Had he known her design, Jacques couldn't have fallen more easily into her hands. During their partnership, Simone carefully arranged Jacques' visits to her house for business discussions to coincide with the large parties she held. She had no desire to have his presence in her courtyard remarked on by the gossips of Port-au-Prince. The scruffy chestnut mare he rode would be less noticeable among the many carriages and mounts belonging to her guests. She found no difficulty in slipping away during the gaiety of the evening to give the man his instructions.

For a week, Margrit and Simone had been planning a particularly lavish reception in honor of a wealthy planter's son. Having reached the age of eighteen, the boy had received a considerable fortune from his indulgent father. The youth had also taken a fancy to a young *femme de couleur* who frequented Simone's salon and wished to become the girl's protector. By negotiating the details of this arrangement, Simone had managed to divert a small portion of the youth's newfound wealth into her own pocket. A party for the boy was only appropriate.

This would also be the perfect opportunity to speak with Jacques about the next shipment of rum. She had sent word to him that he should enter the house by the stairway from the courtyard and wait in the small salon upstairs. This was the usual way they met. When Simone was satisfied that the

reception was going well, she would slip away for their discussion.

Simone wrinkled her brow with distaste at the antics of her guests. This had become an unusually noisy and drunken gathering. The guests were much younger than her regular clientele, and Simone found them uncouth and annoying. She sighed with impatience, wishing for the party to end quickly.

"Madame," Margrit whispered, "Argo is here."

"Tell him to wait, Margrit. I fear for the furniture if I should leave just now," Simone said, casting a meaningful glance toward the honored guest.

The boy had been drunk when he arrived, but he was now barely able to stand. And his friends were goading him to even greater excess. Simone watched him produce a large leather pouch filled with gold pieces, which he flashed before the eyes of the other guests.

Quickly, she made her way to the youth and whispered in his ear to be more cautious. In Port-au-Prince men had been killed for much less gold than this. She had no desire to see this infant's throat cut for the coins he carried. Especially in her house.

But the boy was too drunk with power and brandy to heed his hostess. He threw his arms around her and planted a wet kiss on her neck. When she drew away, he laughed loudly and dropped a gold piece down the bosom of her gown.

He soon became ill from the unaccustomed amount of brandy he had drunk. Simone, her patience at an end, had escorted him to the door and watched him clumsily mount his horse. Good riddance, she thought as he rode slowly away. Now she could speak with Jacques.

She hurried up the stairs and entered the small salon, closing the door quietly behind her only to find the room empty. Uneasy, she opened the shutters and looked out into the courtyard in time to see Argo riding swiftly through the gate to the street. Briefly, she was puzzled. Then she understood. Jacques often watched her guests from the darkened landing of the stairway while he waited for her. No doubt he had seen the bragging youth and his gold. He would kill the boy, Simone was certain.

Her mind whirled. How could she stop him? She could not admit that Argo had been in her house. How could she



explain her suspicions and to whom? If she foiled Jacques' plan, who knew what he might expose. There was, she admitted, nothing to be done. With Argo tracking him, the boy was as good as dead.

"The animal," Simone hissed. She dug her nails into her palms in frustration. She was furious with Jacques. The boy was young and crude, but she liked him. He was a good client and, as such, deserved the protection of her house. There was no need for Jacques' greed to ruin them both. Yes, she regretted the boy's fate. But her eyes narrowed as another thought came to her. Jacques had, this night, unwittingly given her the power she sought. He's mine now to use as I wish, Simone realized. She smiled with satisfaction, then descended the stairs to her guests.

## Chapter 13

Geneviève had survived, that was all Judson knew. It had been three weeks, and she had recovered from the fever and was doing well in the care of Crevaux. He thanked God for that, but he needed more. He needed to see her, to *see* for himself that she was doing well. He needed to talk to her before she left the island, to apologize and set things right between them. He had no illusions that she would ever fully forgive him, but he couldn't leave things as they stood. He *had* to see her again. She would soon be returning to Savannah, if she hadn't already gone. And he had been told nothing.

Judson felt his stomach knot at the thought that Geneviève might no longer be in Saint-Domingue. There had been some slight comfort these long days in knowing that they were only a day's journey apart. What a fool he'd been to wait, trusting in someone else's judgment! He felt his temper rising within him and tried to contain it. He knew by now that anger could only further contribute to his frustration. He told himself that he must remain calm; he must think logically.

Had vanity caused him to let no woman pass through his life without admiring, without appreciating him? That assessment had a ring of truth, but he knew it didn't apply to Geneviève. He was coming to the admission that he loved her. Yes, he could say it: he loved her. Then, why couldn't he

let her go in peace if that was what she truly wanted? He despised selfishness, perhaps because he had to fight it in himself so often. In a moment of self-pity, he thought wryly that he must be forever separated from love. He had loved his parents and they had been taken from him. He realized he must have loved the young girl Genny, because he early began comparing the qualities of other girls against her. And now, Geneviève. He must lose her, too. Mockingly, he declared aloud, "So, now I have two lost loves in Savannah."

At those words his anger and self-pity evaporated and were replaced by a new anxiety. No, *it couldn't be*, he thought with creeping awareness. Could they be the same? The names could be the same, and the ages were right. Why hadn't this occurred to him before? No wonder she had seemed vaguely familiar! Now, he could tarry no longer; he must go to her this very day.

On the night of the massacre, the flames engulfing Pacifique were seen from some of the neighboring plantations. Although the residents were piqued at not having been invited to the ball, there was a tacit agreement about fires, and they sent a few of their employees over to investigate and to help if possible. When the men reported back, these planters were roused from their beds with the most fearsome and unsettling news they could have imagined: a slave rebellion.

Every one of the whites—planters and employees alike—who could be summoned converged at the remains of Pacifique. They numbly surveyed the bodies of the slaves and correctly deduced that the whites had burned in the fire, for there was no trace of them. Organization was swift. Groups of men, armed with indignation and every weapon they could muster, set out to find the murderers. The entire area was combed for any black man, woman or child who was not accounted for. Death was quick for the innocent, too. Pompey and his forty-odd men, grown sluggish from spent energy and rum, were found by a stream in the early hours of the morning. Their bodies were thrown into a mass grave dug hurriedly on the spot. When the bodies of the dead slaves at Pacifique were buried, the necessary story was fabricated. It was said that Pacifique burned because of the carelessness of the servants in the candlelit ballroom. The fire spread rapidly. The guests had been trapped on the second floor, where they

had gone to observe the fireworks display from a greater height.

Except for whispered rumors, no word of what truly happened that night was ever to reach the ears of the French officials. No one challenged the story. These things were best left alone.

Judson had ridden all day, his mind fogged with a sickening apprehension. He no longer wanted to put it into words, so it manifested itself in speed. The need to hurry was overwhelming but, in the end, useless. He was ill-prepared for what he found: the house, a pile of rubble and ash; the slave quarters and fields, deserted; the sugar factory, still. There was no human movement anywhere on the plantation, and the usual sounds of nature were deafening to his ears. He couldn't begin to imagine what had happened. Indeed, his mind balked at trying.

Incautiously, he rode onto the main highway in the direction of Port-au-Prince. It, too, seemed abnormally deserted. He had ridden nearly a mile before he saw a carriage. Its driver was a boy of about eighteen. Judson hailed him.

"What happened at Pacifique?"

The boy looked as if the question had come from a crazy man. When no answer was forthcoming, Judson tried again. "The Crevaux family, where are they?" Still, the boy did not answer.

"The house has burned down, boy. Surely, you know of it!" He was shouting now. "Surely, everyone knows of it. Have you lost your tongue?"

The boy's face registered panic and he began to slap the reins wildly. Judson's horse jumped back as the carriage sped away. The boy's reaction was ominous, but Judson thought that perhaps the youth was feeble-minded and he had frightened him.

A covered landau appeared next, smartly driven by a black coachman accompanied by an armed guard. Judson stood his ground in the center of the road, forcing them to come to a halt.

"Yes, *monsieur*?" asked the guard, obviously irritated at the obstruction.

"I only wanted to ask about the Crevaux plantation," Judson said. Inside were several women who peered out at him when they heard him mention Crevaux.

"Are you a stranger here?"

"I've just come from the Spanish territory."

"There was a tragic accident, *monsieur*," said the guard. "They were killed in the fire."

"But what happened! *Who* was killed? One would think it was all a great secret!"

The guard glared at him, then glanced at the driver. "Excuse me, *monsieur*. We're late, and I must see these ladies home."

Judson watched the landau until it rode out of sight. These two strange encounters, coming one upon the other, had now assured him that something was very wrong—something beyond a mere accident. His heart pounded in his chest as he turned his horse toward Port-au-Prince. He would be taking a great risk to show himself in broad daylight, but this could not wait until nightfall. Jean-Baptiste would surely have the information he sought.

Leaving his horse on the outskirts of town, Judson continued on foot at an unobtrusive distance from the main road. He heard the shouts long before he came upon the many carriages drawn up in the shady field. Through the trees, he spied a huge circle of noisy, animated people. He knew immediately that it was a cockfight—and one with high stakes from the look of the transportation. An idea struck him. He approached a bored-looking driver standing beside a covered coach on the fringe of the field.

"How long will you be waiting?" he asked the man nonchalantly.

"Who knows, *monsieur*? The fight has just started."

"Would you chance to guess it might be thirty minutes before your master requires his coach again?" The man nodded suspiciously as he watched the large coin Judson was flipping in his hand.

Jean-Baptiste was not at home. Judson was told this in a serious manner by a dark beauty who was almost as tall as he. Her hair waved out from her high forehead and strong cheekbones in a long, thick array of loose curls. Although she ended their conversation with a seductive smile, she did not invite him in to wait.

The door closed and he again felt like a trapped animal, but one who was being locked *out* of the safety of a cage. The

coach, his means of concealment to this point, was gone. He thought of knocking again and forcing entrance into the house. He was about to do so when he saw a blustering party of men and women rowdily making their way down the street. Dressed in garishly-colored clothes and wearing absurdly elaborate powdered wigs, they visually declared their identity as an acting troupe. A short, corpulent man led the way, announcing every so often the name and times of their current performance.

Assuming a staggering walk, Judson hailed them in their own festive manner. He pulled the most elaborate wig from the head of one of the men and placed it on his own, laughing loudly and pointing to himself. The others joined him, pointing and laughing, too.

"Yes, *monsieur*, join us! The more, the merrier!"

The man whose wig Judson now wore at a cocked angle tried to retrieve it, but Judson ducked behind a woman and used her as a foil. This caused the others to double over with laughter.

"Stop it, Pierre," someone scolded. "He wants to join us. Don't be a brute."

"But, my wig!" pouted Pierre, who was otherwise bald. No one paid him any attention until, after they had gone a few paces, Pierre plucked a wig from another man. At once, everyone joined the game. They continued down the street, exchanging wigs and emitting shrieks and peals of laughter. They seemed to care no longer which way they went, so Judson was able to lead them. As they passed the house of Madame Bourget, he threw his wig high into the air and, in the resulting pandemonium, ducked into the hedge that abutted her house. Suddenly sober and cautious again, he made his way along the bushes to the rear door.

This will have to do, he thought, as he opened the door and stepped quickly inside. He found himself in the dimly lit back hallway. There were voices coming from the front of the house as the occupants gathered at the windows to watch the commotion of the passing troupe. He waited in the shadows until he saw the familiar figure of Madame Bourget approaching. When she was almost upon him, he stepped out and greeted her.

Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream. Judson Talbot's appearance meant that the problem of Geneviève

was fresh upon her again. She knew that the girl had been with him for some time now, since they had last been seen together, and she feared how much of Geneviève's story he had pieced together. She had prayed incessantly that the two were by now in France and herself, thereby, finally out of danger. Regaining her composure, she said, "I cannot believe my eyes, captain. You frightened me greatly! You seem to make a habit of surprising people." She peered into the shadows behind him. "Is the girl with you?"

"Forgive me, *madame*," Judson apologized, bowing obsequiously to kiss her hand. "May we retire to a more private place to talk?"

She looked nervously around and saw that no one had noticed them. "Follow me." She motioned and led him into Margrit's tiny sitting room. Judson took one of the two chairs, but Madame Bourget chose to stand by the window, between him and the door.

"You are still frightened, *madame*?"

"Of course not."

"Then sit, if you please."

"I've been sitting most of the day, captain. If you'll excuse me, I prefer to stand now."

"Suit yourself, but call me Judson. I think it's time we were on less formal terms . . . Simone?" Judson knew that to get anything from her he would have to woo her.

"Yes, please do." A hint of a smile crossed her face. Had he perhaps tired of the young girl?

"Is your friend d'Villiers here? Are you expecting him?"

"Don't speak that vile name in my presence," she lashed out but caught herself and added, "You are sorely mistaken if you think the comte is a friend of mine."

"Then I may assume you won't advise him of our meeting?"

"That is an exceedingly safe assumption."

"Please, Simone, sit. I'd be more comfortable. You have nothing to fear from me."

Madame Bourget smiled wanly and took the chair opposite him. "Why are you here, Judson? I thought you and Geneviève would be out of the country by now. The comte would . . ."

"Let's not talk of what the comte would do," he interrupted. "I have little time, Simone. I've come to you for information."

"So, you seek only to use me, Judson. It would have pleased me had you come out of friendship."

"This isn't a time in my life when I have the leisure to develop friendships." He smiled. He was finding it difficult not to blurt out the reason for his visit. He would prefer to simply grab the woman and shake the information out of her. Yet, he knew that he'd have to prime her to get the answers he wanted.

"What is it, Judson?"

"I want to know what has happened to Monsieur Crevaux and his family. So far, I've been able to learn only of a mysterious fire. No one will speak of it further."

"There is just cause not to. They fear for their very lives. Everyone on this island who knows the truth is sworn to secrecy. It was slaves, Judson. The Crevaux family and the others didn't die in the fire. They were horribly murdered before they burned."

"What 'others'?" he cried, suddenly alert.

"There was a ball. There must have been twenty or thirty people involved."

"Everyone was killed? There were no survivors?"

"Apparently no one escaped. Everyone is forbidden to speak of it for fear it will cause further uprisings. It's likely that no one knows the whole truth, for there are no witnesses. Even the slaves who didn't commit the murders were killed."

"Surely *someone* knows something."

"The murderers were caught and executed outright, and there wasn't a living soul on the plantation when help arrived. No surviving whites have turned up, and if any blacks survived, they are most certainly hiding if they value their lives."

"If there are such blacks in hiding, do you know where they could be found? I've got to know what happened!" Judson knew he was risking a lot to reveal anything to Simone Bourget, but the situation was desperate. If Geneviève were alive, this might enable him to find her sooner. If she were dead, it wouldn't matter.

"Why this intense concern? I didn't know you were so closely acquainted with Alphonse Crevaux." She questioned him slowly, carefully choosing her words. "If they were friends of mine, I'd prefer not to know the ghastly details."

He hesitated only a moment longer before he spoke. "Geneviève was there."



"What?" His statement took her by surprise. Then its significance began to dawn on her. Geneviève was dead at last. She felt palpable relief spread through her body and hoped it was not apparent to her visitor.

"Yes, Crevaux was concealing her at Pacifique. Even if she were alive, she wouldn't be willing to show herself to tell of it."

These last words of Judson's evaporated Madame Bourget's brief happiness. Somehow, she knew then that Geneviève had escaped. Of late, that was the pattern of her fortunes. Suddenly, her desire to search out any witnesses was as great as his. "I see," she said. "Then I'll do all in my power to discover her fate." She stood to go. "I'll begin inquiries immediately. You look tired, Judson. Go now and lie down in my bed. I can assure you the comte won't find you there."

"Thank you, Simone." He rose and took her hand. "But I have in mind another place, which is a bit less public." He smiled as he said it, then kissed her hand. His lips sought out the soft, fleshy area between the thumb and forefinger. Looking up, he asked, "If I could trouble you for a closed carriage and a driver of discretion?"

She was angry that he refused to stay. But when his lips touched her flesh, their moist softness edged with the prickle of his unshaven face, she felt a piercing thrill of passion. It was disturbing. Only one other man had ever caused such a feeling in her.

It was nearly dark when Judson knocked again at the door. This time it was Jean-Baptiste who opened it.

"So, Judson, you have returned. Céline remarked that we had had a fascinating caller. Come in."

Jean-Baptiste ushered him through the foyer and into a large room that took up the entire rear of the house. It was the most comfortable room Judson had encountered since he had left France. Oriental carpets in deep reds and blues covered the floor, and there were a number of cushioned chairs. A massive, elaborately carved mantel above an unused fireplace dominated one end of the room. One wall was lined with leather-bound volumes. The others were crowded with prints; scenes of Paris and the Palais Royal vied with those of reclining nudes.

"Welcome to my lair, Judson. I leave it only under protest. This is Céline."

The woman who had met him at the door earlier was seated at a small table. Both she and Jean-Baptiste wore finely embroidered dressing gowns.

Judson bowed at the introduction. "I fear I've disturbed you at your dinner."

"Then you must join us," offered Jean-Baptiste heartily. "Céline, would you set another place and see that a bath is drawn for my friend?" Céline smiled seductively and left the room.

"Had I remotely suspected you'd come here," continued Jean-Baptiste, "I'd have left word for Céline to admit you. But I went to Barahona to tell you about the tragedy. Now it seems you were one step ahead of me. How did you find out?"

"I knew nothing when I left Barahona. I was disturbed because there had been no further word of Geneviève."

"And you found Pacifique as it is."

Judson sat heavily on one of the chairs. He had not slept in over twenty-four hours. He raised a weary face to Jean-Baptiste. "Tell me, Jean-Baptiste, what do you know about that night? Is it possible that Geneviève wasn't killed? That she escaped?"

"One has to think of the circumstances. Crevaux was a very careful man. It was his task to see that no one knew of Geneviève's presence, so we can rest assured that she didn't attend the ball."

"Where could she have been? The house was burned. One of the out buildings? I understand they were very thorough."

"Quite true."

"How can we find out? As I told Madame Bourget, even if she had escaped, she wouldn't show herself."

"Madame Bourget! Surely, you haven't been to that woman again?"

Judson turned to see Céline reenter the room. She was followed by a black man bearing a silver, covered plate and a wine glass. He placed them on the table and left. Judson turned back to Jean-Baptiste. "I was willing to try any avenue. I thought perhaps she had contacts that even you . . ." He suddenly felt embarrassed. "I mean, of the unsavory sort."

"*Monsieur*," said Céline, seating herself at the table once again. "One should never underestimate Jean-Baptiste."

"Thank you, Céline," said Jean-Baptiste as he placed an extra chair at the table for Judson. "Come, my friend. We'll break with tradition once again and have you eat with us."

Jean-Baptiste poured the wine. "So, Judson, you seem to have challenged me to perform my work faster. Now, I have to compete with the wiles of Madame Bourget."

"Jean-Baptiste, I beg your pardon. I didn't mean . . ."

"I'm jesting with you," he said with a wave of his hand. "Nevertheless, I suspect that woman's motives. But perhaps she'll lead us to something. What did she agree to do?"

"We discussed the possibility that some of Crevaux's slaves may have escaped and are in hiding. She agreed to make inquiries."

"A sound move. That's exactly what I propose to do. If any slave still alive witnessed that massacre, he'll have made for the mountains to lose himself among the *marrons*. Do you know of the *marrons*?"

"Yes, I've heard of them."

"Then we'll depart for the mountains at first light. I'll go now to make certain arrangements and to test the wind for any of Madame Bourget's schemes." He finished his wine and stood. "You should rest, Judson. You'll need your strength for tomorrow. Céline will see that you're comfortable."

Judson thought he saw him wink before he closed the door and was gone. Céline, when he turned to her, was watching him. "*Monsieur Talbot*," she said gently, "you've eaten like a bird. Is the food disagreeable?"

"No, *mademoiselle*. The food is superb. I seem to have no appetite," he offered.

"You're tired, *monsieur*. Come with me. Your bath is ready."

She led him through a tiny door that Judson hadn't noticed before, and up a back staircase to a bedchamber on the second floor. The bed took up only a small corner of the room, in the center of which stood an oversized copper tub filled with water. It was more than oversized; it looked as if it could easily accommodate three people.

"The night is hot enough, *monsieur*. I've instructed that the bath water should not be hot, but only warm enough to relax your muscles."

"That was most kind, *mademoiselle*."

"Céline. You may call me Céline." Her voice was noticeably lower and softer now.

"Thank you, Céline." He paused, expecting her to leave him then, but she showed no signs of going. She stood solidly, arms folded in front of her, a mischievous smile animating her face. Then she turned and, in lithe, catlike movements, busied herself with arranging a small table by the bath. She placed on it a cup, soap, linen towels and two candles, which she lit. The doors leading to a second-floor balcony were open to the warm night breeze and the soothing sounds of palm fronds rustling against the railing. Above the swaying fronds, Judson could see the twinkling anchor lights of the many ships bobbing silently in the harbor.

Céline glanced at him. He was standing awkwardly by the bed, and she had to laugh. "You may remove your clothing, *monsieur*."

Judson had not supposed he was to undress himself before she left the room. She was, after all, Jean-Baptiste's woman and not a servant. But her laugh embarrassed him into preparing himself. He removed his coat and fumbled at the buttons of his vest. He thought perhaps this was just another island custom with which he was unfamiliar.

Céline watched his hesitation as if it were that of an adolescent. She approached him then, shaking her head in disapproval and smiling. Standing before him, she suggested easily, "Do as I do, *monsieur*." She untied the sash of her dressing gown, pulled it slowly from her shoulders and let it cascade to the floor around her feet. She wore nothing underneath.

Judson let his eyes wash over the taut, golden skin of her beautifully proportioned body. Then, quickly, as if suddenly coming to his senses, he looked her straight in the eyes. Bafflement creased his forehead.

"I wasn't expecting this," he blurted.

"Do you find me unattractive?" she asked.

"Good Lord, no! But Jean-Baptiste will . . ."

"Oh, now I see," she said, coming closer and taking the recalcitrant buttons of the vest into her own hands. "Jean-Baptiste and I are the greatest of friends. That's all, *monsieur*. Do you understand?"

Judson felt a response at this point was unnecessary. She was now at work on the buttons of his sweat-stained shirt. When it opened, her hands moved across his tan chest and up

to his shoulders to slide the garment from his body. As she did so, her plump breasts grazed him, sending a weakening tremor through his legs.

"So many buttons, *monsieur!*" she exclaimed as her long, thin fingers unfastened his breeches. Because of their snugness, she had to pull them over his buttocks and down his legs, taking the stockings with them.

When he stood naked before her, she took his hand and led him to the bath. They entered it together. While he was yet standing, she took the cup and dipped water over him and, with practiced hands, lathered him thoroughly from head to foot.

When he sank down into the water, she knelt over him and began to massage his neck and shoulders, her glistening breasts rolling with her exertions. His hands reached up to cover them and she let out a low moan but continued kneading him. He let his hands slide down the voluptuous curve of her waist and across the flatness of her stomach. When his hand found her womanhood, she closed her eyes and he could feel down his own spine the shiver she released. He could stand it no longer, and pulled her willing body onto his.

Judson woke from a deep and dreamless sleep to the insistent voice of Jean-Baptiste. "Wake up, my friend. Someone is here with an urgent message from Madame Bourget."

Groggily, Judson rose to a sitting position and rubbed his eyes. His voice was heavy with sleep. "How could she know where I am, Jean-Baptiste? I dismissed her driver before we ever came near your house."

Jean-Baptiste laughed. "You told her about your connection with Crevaux. It was a simple matter to connect you with me."

Margrit was waiting nervously in the magnificent sitting room-cum-library when Judson entered, still buttoning his vest. "Yes, Margrit? You have a message for me?"

The woman spoke as if reciting from memory. "Madame Bourget wishes to express her deepest sympathy. She was out the entire night procuring the information you required. She only wanted you to know as soon as possible that the girl, Geneviève, was killed with the others. This is certain. *Madame* asks that you come to her later and she'll provide you with the details of what she has learned."

Before Judson could speak, Jean-Baptiste stepped into the room and took the woman by the arm. "Thank you, Margrit. Monsieur Talbot will want to be alone now." He ushered her out and, when he returned, found Judson slumped in a chair.

"This is very strange, my friend."

"*Strange?*" uttered Judson, incredulous at Jean-Baptiste's reaction.

"Even with all her powers, I doubt she could have such conclusive information so soon."

Judson sat up. "You think she's lying?"

"It makes me wonder."

"What could she possibly have to gain from lying?"

"That's what I think strange, Judson." After a moment, he added, "Come, we have work to do." What he didn't admit was that he felt a new urgency. Madame Bourget was obviously one step ahead of them.

## Chapter 14

Margrit's gray eyes widened in surprise, then in fear as she heard the stranger's words. She attempted to compose herself, but was certain that the man had noted her alarm.

"*Monsieur*, if you would please step inside, I'll see if Madame Bourget is in," she offered. The *cocotte* forced a smile to her face, but it became a nervous grimace despite her efforts.

"Who shall I say is calling?" So agitated was Margrit on hearing the name d'Binet from the lips of this visitor, that she could not recall if he had introduced himself to her.

"I'm a friend of Guy-Pierre d'Binet," the blond gentleman had told her. "Monsieur d'Binet has recommended the hospitality of your mistress. I wish to see her." Margrit had been stunned.

"Seth McKenna is my name," he now repeated. "It won't mean anything to Madame Bourget. However, I believe the name d'Binet will mean a great deal to her."

"Yes, Monsieur McKenna. I'll see." Margrit hurried away from his inquisitive look.

Seth watched Margrit's flight with satisfaction. Yes, he thought, she knows something of this affair. I've come to the source of this wretched business.

To his surprise, Seth had found the home of Simone Bourget with ease. On leaving the ship, he had sought directions at the first tavern he passed. He was greeted with

winks and ribald comments from the proprietor but was given explicit directions. He thought of the suspicions Guy-Pierre had recorded in his diary. D'Binet had been correct in thinking his lover's home had become "a salon of the common sort." The home of Simone Bourget was well known in Port-au-Prince.

"Monsieur McKenna, yes? I am Simone Bourget."

Seth looked up to see a stunning, dark-haired woman gazing directly into his eyes. She was almost as tall as he. She was remarkably controlled. This one won't be an easy opponent, Seth thought. He had not expected her to be.

He returned her frank gaze with more than a little curiosity. Where was the innocent Simone of the diary? She was indeed beautiful, but any vestige of gentleness Guy-Pierre had found in her had been replaced with a studied sophistication that Seth found distasteful. While he regarded her, Seth attempted to imagine the *jeune fille* Guy-Pierre had met.

"What do you wish of me, Monsieur McKenna? I don't receive guests at this hour of the morning. I regret to inform you that you intrude."

"*Madame*, Guy-Pierre d'Binet spoke well of your hospitality. Of course, I'll leave you if the hour is inconvenient, but I'll return in the evening." Seth caught a slight flash of emotion crossing the woman's face as he spoke and he knew he had rattled her.

"If you insist, *monsieur*, I'll give you a moment," she relented coldly. "Follow me."

Indicating a chair for Seth, Madame Bourget seated herself across from him. Behind her hung her portrait as a girl of about fourteen. Seth caught his breath in appreciation of the beauty the artist had captured. Now he could understand his friend's indiscretion. He didn't wonder that Guy-Pierre, a very young Guy-Pierre, had fallen under the spell of such a bewitching creature as the young Simone. The portrait girl regarded him with wide, guileless eyes and sweetly parted lips. Yes, seeing Simone as she was then, he could easily imagine Guy-Pierre in this house. But he knew why it had all ended, when he looked into the face of the woman who sat opposite him.

"How well do you know Monsieur d'Binet?" Simone demanded.

"I knew him well, *madame*. I helped to bury him."

A sickly pallor replaced Simone's glowing color. Her hand



trembled as she reached for the silver bell on the table beside her chair. "*Monsieur*, how can you make such a monstrous joke?" she asked in a strained voice.

Before Seth could reply, Margrit had rushed to her mistress in reply to the bell. "Brandy, Margrit," Simone ordered. "Quickly."

"Shall we cease to play games, Madame Bourget?" Seth challenged, pressing his advantage. "You were aware before I of Guy-Pierre's death. I realize that you didn't strike him down with your own hand, but the guilt is yours, as the plan was yours."

"You're insane. He left this island years ago. I know nothing of him since that time. You speculate, *monsieur*."

"I'm far too cautious to speculate. Would you care to see my proof of your hand in this matter?"

Seth reached into his coat pocket for the letter and diary. He saw that Simone had lost her confident, direct gaze. She took the brandy Margrit offered, sipping eagerly. A little color returned to her cheeks, but she didn't challenge Seth as he read first from her letter, then from Guy-Pierre's diary.

"Enough, *monsieur*," she interrupted before he had finished. "What do you propose to do, now that you have this information?"

"That will depend on you," he told her. "Perhaps I'll destroy this record. But, then, these documents may be placed in the hands of certain officials of Saint-Domingue. Guy-Pierre d'Binet is dead, but he has many friends remaining on this island."

"You've made your purpose clear, Monsieur McKenna," Simone said with controlled fury. "What do you want?"

"I want the safe return of Geneviève d'Binet. If you've harmed her, I'll destroy you without the slightest hesitation. However, if she's returned safely to me, I'll give these papers over to you. *Madame*, I'm not seeking revenge for my friend. But I will have Geneviève. Your future depends on your ability to return her to me."

Simone studied Seth's hard, young face. I don't doubt your determination, Simone thought to herself. All of this has come about because of that little witch, Geneviève. I told Jacques on the very evening that he delivered her that this would come to pass. At least, you haven't yet gone to the authorities. There is still time.

"Monsieur McKenna, it's clear that we must accommodate

one another. I'll tell you what I've heard, but first I must speak with my *cocotte*." Again, Madame Bourget rang the silver bell, and Margrit appeared. "Margrit, bring Sebastien. Tell him it's urgent."

"Who might Sebastien be?" Seth asked, frowning.

"Sebastien is a freed slave, *monsieur*. He does work for me on occasion, and he knows the mountains well. You'll be in need of a guide if you wish to find Geneviève. Now listen carefully, *monsieur*. Geneviève d'Binet did pass through my house. I'll say no more than that, except that she was unharmed. She's no longer here. I tried to find her, but until recently I had no word of her whereabouts. Through reliable sources I heard of a tragic event that, strangely, has led to information about her. I'll tell you of this event, but my words mustn't be discussed in Saint-Domingue. The stability of our system depends on your discretion."

"Very well," Seth replied. "You have my word."

"There has occurred a slave rebellion in the Cul-de-Sac. This is the area in which some of the largest plantations of Saint-Domingue are found. Because the plantations are isolated, it has been possible to keep this situation secret. I need not tell you what effect this news would have upon other slaves on the island. If given courage by such an incident, the entire slave population in this colony could rise up against their masters."

"I have no desire to interfere in the politics of this colony. My one desire is to find Mademoiselle d'Binet. What has this rebellion to do with her?"

"My sources have reported to me a young white girl in the mountains. She and a number of slaves have fled the rebellion in the Cul-de-Sac to the safety of the mountains. And the *marrons* who live there have given this girl and her companions their protection. As my source described the girl to me, I can only guess that she must be Geneviève. I'll provide a guide for you on condition that, when you find Geneviève, you leave this island with her. Also, you must return those papers to me. Shall this be our agreement?"

"Yes, but I prefer to hire my own guide," Seth said.

"If you wish, you may attempt to find a guide. But, *monsieur*, you won't find one who will go with you. Though the *marrons* have not been hostile in years, they are jealous of their territory. Few would venture into their area. You would be wise to take Sebastien."

"Then I will do so. But first, I should return to the inn for my baggage. We'll leave at dusk, when it's cooler."

"Monsieur McKenna, while you're away, don't reveal the documents to anyone. If you do, you'll never again see Geneviève."

Seth eyed the woman coldly. "If I don't see her again, *madame*, you may be certain you'll never see another year. Good day."

"Margrit," Simone called when the door had closed behind her visitor.

"Yes, Madame Bourget," she answered.

"Sebastien. Have you found him?"

"He waits in the compound, *madame*."

"Very well." Simone nodded. "I'll go to him. We have little time."

Sebastien stood in the walled courtyard of the compound. The household servants, moving from the house to the detached kitchen, walked as far from him as possible. Their heads were bowed and their eyes studied the ground at their feet. None so much as glanced at the man, but the nervous movement of their bodies proclaimed his presence.

He was a formidable figure, even if he had not borne the reputation of a *bocor*. Though of average height, his body was well-developed, with heavy muscles like knotted rope across his arms and shoulders. His head was large, his brow prominent. And his scalp glistened; Sebastien shaved his head to heighten the dramatic quality of his features. Below the shelf of his brow, his eyes were watchful and unblinking behind thick lids.

He was dressed in a green vest and a pair of drawstring trousers of coarse muslin. His feet were bare, and around his neck he wore an amulet of parrot feathers hung from a chain of dark metal.

Simone stepped into the sunlight of the courtyard. Spying Sebastien, she hesitated. She could not fully escape her dread of facing a *bocor*, though she had employed him on several occasions.

Like most *gens de couleur*, Simone was a Catholic, but she continued to embrace the old religion of voodoo. Though she would have angrily denied its appeal, it was voodoo that Simone called upon in times of trouble. She was not alone in her double alliance. The *gens de couleur* of the island were as often to be found in the hut of the *mambo*, who performed

benign voodoo rituals, as attending mass. But none would have admitted to the practice of voodoo—it was forbidden by law.

Dealing with a *bocor* was a most serious matter, as he specialized in the ceremonies and spells of magic, not the normal religious rites of the *mambo*. The magic that he conjured was destined to bring misfortune to a chosen victim. For this, the practitioner was hated and feared by the community. His power was thought to be unequaled in matters of vengeance, on which he was often consulted; however, none loved him. He had exchanged his place among men for the power of the supernatural.

Simone had gone to Sebastien seeking a spell to assure the success of Jacques Argo's trip to Savannah. The incantation had worked, and she was now convinced of Sebastien's abilities. But she often wondered if he preferred having her in his control to taking the large sum of money she paid him.

"I'm grateful that you've come, Sebastien. I have need of you," she said hesitantly. He did not reply, but watched her face from beneath his thick lids. Simone hated his silences. She felt compelled to fill the void with words. Often, she had found herself babbling in his presence, spilling forth information she wouldn't have dreamed of telling. She resolved that this wouldn't happen today.

"The girl in the mountains, the one you described to me . . . a man has come for her, Sebastien. He must never find her. Do you understand? Also, this man carries certain papers that I must have in my hands. I've told Monsieur McKenna that you'll guide him into the mountains to find the girl. He and the girl, Geneviève, must not return to Port-au-Prince. I beseech you to dispose of these problems for me. You'll be rewarded handsomely."

Simone wondered if the man had heard her. His face was turned from her, and he appeared to be watching the fat green lizards sunning on the courtyard wall. He was as still and silent as an animal. She pressed her damp palms to the pale blue fabric of her skirt and waited.

Slowly, his face swung around to her. "*Madame* wishes that I should kill the man and the woman."

"Yes, Sebastien, that's my wish."

"The cost will be great, *Madame Bourget*," he said.

"It doesn't matter. And remember, there's the girl for you. You may do with her as you wish. She's very beautiful, this

young one." Simone saw a flicker in his eyes. "Will you come at dusk? Monsieur McKenna will return then."

"I will come," he answered, his eyes measuring her. "When I ride down from the mountains, the payment will be due."

"Then it is settled. I'll wait for word from you."

Sebastien inclined his head in dismissal then walked to the courtyard wall. He held out his hand to the lizards basking on the sun-warmed rocks. Swiftly, they slithered up his arm, to crouch, blinking, on his shoulders. Simone shivered and turned back to the house.

Seth McKenna dismounted in the courtyard of Madame Bourget's house. He tightened the straps of the canvas pack slung across the rump of his rented horse. As he adjusted the baggage, he studied his guide. What instructions had Madame Bourget given this brutal man? he wondered. Had she ordered Sebastien to kill him when they reached the mountains? Still, it was possible that the woman would be satisfied simply to have Geneviève removed from Saint-Domingue. Or perhaps she had told Sebastien to kill them both.

I'll have to take that chance, Seth decided. These people are my only link with Geneviève. No doubt they have news of her. But I must watch my back with this Sebastien.

He mounted and signaled for Sebastien to ride ahead. Urging his horse through the courtyard gate, Seth glanced up at the second story of Madame Bourget's house. He thought that he caught a furtive movement behind a shuttered window, but he couldn't be sure. With a shrug, he followed Sebastien's broad back into the gathering darkness.

## Chapter 15

Geneviève finished peeling the mango, wiped her hands, and glanced at Marie's dark head as the girl bent over the cookfire. A sweet, earthy fragrance of woodsmoke and yams baking in ashes, drifted through the clearing of the *marron* village.

"Marie, I haven't thanked you for your help this morning. I am grateful."

"It was a small thing I did. But I was afraid. And you?"

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, as she poured rich black coffee into two cups, "I was afraid for myself, afraid for all of us."

Geneviève wrapped her shawl more closely around her against the chill wind gusting down from the mountain peaks. The *marrons* in the clearing were cooking their evening meals over charcoal fires before their huts. The camp was noisy with the laughter of children rolling about the dusty ground in play. Tethered goats bleated to be fed. Geneviève was happy to be a part of this peaceful camp. Had it not been for Marie . . .

Their motley band had slept only a few hours since they had left the Crevaux plantation. They had awakened before dawn to ride single file through miles of swaying monkey grass and whirling clouds of white dust. Quickly, they had ridden through the cool gray-green foothills before ascending the red

clay trail winding up the mountain. The track led steadily upward through guava groves filled with squawking parakeets disturbed in their roosts by the caravan passing below. Thick tropical vines caught at Geneviève's clothing, and low-hanging branches slapped at her face. The torchlight illuminated lush fern beds and huge rose and lavender-colored blossoms nestled beneath every black-green copse. She caught glimpses of vivid orange and yellow orchid clusters suspended from the thicket above her. Geneviève urged her tired horse through dusty ravines, then up the nearly vertical trail again.

"Geneviève," Marie called from the darkness ahead. "I must stop. Will you help me?"

Geneviève knew that Marie was in pain. She rode poorly and the mountain trail was a challenge for the best of horsemen. When she reached her, Marie was slumped in the saddle.

"My legs, Geneviève. It's only cramp, but I must get down for a moment."

"Jean," she called, "help me get her down. You'll be better soon, Marie."

As they lifted her from the saddle, Marie gave a yelp of pain. Placing her gently on the ground, Geneviève massaged the muscles of the girl's legs until the cramping had eased. She adjusted the stirrups of Marie's saddle to make her as comfortable as possible.

"Marie, you mustn't fight against the horse's gait. Try to move with him."

"How I hate the beast!" The girl laughed. "But I'll do as you say."

"Surely, it can't be much farther, Jean. Marie is almost spent," Geneviève told him.

"The village lies on the far side of the next peak, *mademoiselle*," Jean replied. "Marie, it will be only a short ride now."

They remounted and Jean waved to the others to follow. Slowly, they rose toward the peak that Jean had indicated. The first dim rays of the sun made their destination visible, but the torches they carried were still needed in the shadows of the dense forest.

The trail turned sharply to avoid an overhanging rock shelf, then suddenly widened enough to permit Geneviève to ride abreast of Marie. They were following the crest of a ridge

where the trees fell back from the path to allow a view of the mists hanging in the fertile valleys below. Geneviève glanced ahead in time to see Jean rein in his horse. Her eyes followed the direction of his gaze and her breath caught in her throat.

"Marie," she whispered, her attention fixed to the side of the trail, "what is it?"

Lining the path on both sides stood wooden spikes that towered above their heads. Tied to the top of each stake was a dead bird—a black chicken, a dove, a white chicken and a guinea hen. Geneviève heard a low moan roll down the torchlit column of blacks behind her as they spotted the dead fowl. She felt a shudder of dread run through her.

"Marie?"

"Don't be alarmed, Geneviève," the girl answered.

Geneviève saw that Marie was intently studying the ground beneath her horse's hooves. Looking down, she saw that the ground had been covered with intricate symbols and dotted with what appeared to be small piles of food.

"This is voodoo. The *marrons* have placed it here to ward off their enemies. We have nothing to fear from it," Marie smiled. "We come in friendship."

Jean was waving for them to continue along the trail, and they moved off at a slow pace.

"Still, Marie, it's frightening to me."

"Yes," Marie nodded. "I understand. Sometimes, we've found the behavior of the white priests to be frightening."

"The rituals of the priests, Marie?"

"Yes, we didn't understand them. When I was a child, I was very much afraid. But then Monsieur Crevaux explained the meanings to me and I ceased to be frightened."

They rode on, each deep in thought.

"Those symbols on the ground were beautifully drawn, Marie. Did you understand their meaning?"

"Yes, I read them. Not every *mambo* or *houngan* has the hand to draw the *vèvès* so well. But, those, those were very good. Each *loa*, or spirit, has his own symbols. I'll teach you, yes? I don't want you to fear the voodoo, Geneviève. If you understand, you won't be afraid."

Geneviève smiled. "I'd like that, Marie. We've learned a great deal from each other in this short time."

They rode on in silence as the sun burst over the mountain range, flooding the trail with light. Jean turned his horse and



rode back toward the women. When he reached them, he twisted in his saddle and pointed to the bend in the trail ahead.

"The camp should be around that bend," he indicated. "I don't know how we'll be greeted. Perhaps well, but then. . . ." He shrugged. "I'll ride into the camp first and ask for the *marrons'* protection. It wouldn't be wise if we rode in together. Our arrival might be misunderstood. Marie, *mademoiselle*, don't follow until I give you a sign. If I should ride back toward you, don't appear to be frightened, but turn your horses and ride quickly down the trail. You'll do this?" Jean's dark eyes questioned the women anxiously.

"We'll do as you say, Jean," Marie promised.

He nodded and rode off to give the others their instructions.

Geneviève and Marie rounded the bend a short distance behind Jean. They saw that he was riding at a deliberate pace toward a group of men blocking the path where it led into a large, sheltered clearing. As one, the girls reined in their horses. Their eyes met, and Geneviève felt a prickle of anxiety run down her spine.

She couldn't make out Jean's words, but she could hear the murmur of his voice as he spoke quietly to the *marrons*. A stocky man wearing a ragged blue shirt appeared to be the leader. He stepped toward Jean and raised his fist even with Jean's face. The man's voice rose harshly as he angrily stared in the direction of the women. Alarmed, Geneviève turned to Marie. The girl had gone rigid in the saddle, and a deep frown creased her brow. Geneviève's eyes returned to the *marrons*, her attention drawn by the furious tone of the leader's voice. "*Fut blanc*" was the one phrase she caught as the man raged at Jean. The phrase was enough. I'm the problem, she realized. They don't want a white woman in their camp.

As she started to speak to Marie, the girl kicked her horse into a gallop. She bore down upon the group of men, halting at the last moment before their angry leader.

Geneviève forgot her fear in her amazement. She had never seen Marie ride with such skill. The girl sat her mount with her head high and her back straight. Her dark, slender body was regal and commanding. When she spoke, her voice was sharp. Her tone was that of a queen addressing her errant subjects, then it softened to that of a mother instructing her children.

The men had fallen back at her approach, and now they seemed riveted by her words. Marie spoke again, this time so softly that the wind carried her words away. Geneviève could only tell from the *marrons* the effect of what her *cocotte* had said. They were nodding in agreement, and the angry tension seemed to have left them. Marie turned in her saddle, waving to Geneviève and the others to follow her. The *marrons* moved to the side of the trail and allowed the band to enter the clearing.

When she had reached Marie, Geneviève said tensely, "They're angry because of me, I've placed you all in danger."

"No, it's not you, Geneviève. They've been treated harshly by whites. Don't blame them. It will go well now. But, come, there's much to do. We've been given a sleeping hut to share."

After her exhausting ride the hut, or *caille*, looked the height of luxury. It was one of the better ones in the camp, Geneviève noticed. Plastered inside and out, it was densely thatched with straw. The floor was hard-packed earth swept clean. Two sleeping mats of woven banana stalks had been spread out. Eagerly, they examined the interior of their small shelter, arranging the meager belongings they had carried up the mountain in their packs.

"I know you, yes?" a friendly voice called from the doorway. "You're Marie from the Crevaux plantation."

Geneviève saw, smiling in at them, a large, handsome woman wearing a yellow bandana and heavy copper hoops in her ears.

"I am," Marie answered. "And you're Jeanette?"

"Yes. I ran from the Bouche plantation a little time past. I've brought you water from the spring. You'll want to drink and bathe, I think."

Gratefully, they accepted the calabash the woman offered. Both girls were covered with the chalky white dust from the trail and were greatly in need of a bath. When they had cleaned their clothes and bathed, they began to receive a stream of visitors. Each brought a gift of food. In exchange, their guests sought news of friends and relatives in the Cul-de-Sac. The small mound of offerings grew as the day became warmer, until there was a very large pile. The women had brought rice, sweet potatoes, red beans, manioc, plantains, avocado and papaya. Two chickens, tied by their feet, clucked angrily by the doorway.

Geneviève laughed with delight as she examined their stores. "At least we'll eat well, Marie. How kind of the women to share with us. But, what about the others from the plantation? Will they fare so well?"

"You know, Geneviève, you weren't the only reason the *marrons* didn't want us to enter their camp. They thought we were too many. Some have been sent to the other camps in the mountains. Food isn't as plentiful as usual. Rain is needed badly this season." Marie looked ruefully at her dress as she spoke. The dark blue material was powdered with fine, white dust. "But it's fortunate, in a sense, that we come now. Jeanette has told me there will be an offering to the *loa*, Damballah Weydo, tomorrow night."

"Damballah Weydo?"

"Yes, from Damballah comes the rain. A plea must be made to him. If he's pleased, the mountains will be favored once again with the usual showers. You'll see. I'll take you to the ceremony. I'll ask permission of the *mambo*. It's very likely that she'll allow this."

Contentment stole over Geneviève as she sat in the doorway of the *caille*. She felt safe in this remote village of fiercely independent people. At Marie's urging, they had granted her asylum.

When the *marrons* had completed their visiting with Marie and Geneviève, the village resumed its usual rhythm. Geneviève looked around the clearing with interest. Two types of *cailles* were built in a loose circle. A poorer kind than the one she and Marie occupied seemed to be the most prevalent; of mud plastered over a hand-hewn frame, the roof was thatched with palm branches or guinea grass. Before each hut lay the cooking area of stones and a small brazier. In the center of the clearing stood a large, open-walled hut. The voodoo ceremony would be held there.

In front of the *caille* nearest theirs, two women pounded corn in a hollowed-out log. Their chatter and the slap of the sticks they used to crack the kernels formed a lulling background to Geneviève's thoughts. Further down the clearing, near the pit used for cockfights, a man tossed his prized fighting cock high above his head again and again. The bird fluttered his wings furiously as he descended to his owner's hands. Geneviève watched, fascinated, as the sparkling green-black feathers burst into motion in the bright sunlight.

She knew that later there would be shouts and laughter

from the area of the pit, as each man encouraged his favorite in the contest. Women did not join the crowd, and Geneviève was not disappointed. She had no desire to watch the fights.

The sun was dropping quickly behind the peaks, and Geneviève noticed several women lighting the charcoal smudge-fires that would drive away the huge mosquitoes that descended with the darkness. The deep throbbing of a message-drum started from a slope below the clearing. The sound swelled in power to an urgent staccato. Somewhere down in the moist fern glade of a neighboring village, the drummer crouched over the head of his drum, waiting for the answer to his message. Geneviève watched as the calloused hands of the village drummer beat out a reply.

A woman from the Crevaux plantation crossed the clearing, balancing a basket of bitter oranges on her head. Seeing Geneviève, she waved happily. Geneviève returned her greeting, but the woman brought with her a reminder of the violence they had so recently fled.

The memory of Crevaux and his family was painful to her. She grieved for Crevaux even more than for the others. He had been a man of character trapped in a society where principles and humanity were considered worthless. Unable to break free, he had ultimately paid with his life for the cruelty of a system he despised.

Geneviève was sobered by the realization that without her avuncular sponsor she must look to her own resources. She knew that she couldn't stay in the mountains. After a few days' rest, she must again think of a means of reaching Savannah. But for now, she would firmly put this from her mind. It was a rare privilege she was enjoying. Few whites had been accepted into these villages, and it would be wasteful to spend her days sunk in gloom when they could be spent learning and understanding. When the time comes to leave, Jean and Marie will help me, she resolved. I will manage.

"Geneviève, the *mambo* has given permission for you to attend the ceremony tonight," Marie announced. "It will be a large gathering. Many from the other villages will come."

"Was that the message conveyed by the drums?"

Marie nodded. "The women are preparing the food for Damballah now. He must be offered a fine meal; he's always hungry. Each of the faithful gives to the feast of the *loa*. For

Damballah Weydo, the food must be white. This is the color he prefers. I've offered maize cakes for the feast."

Geneviève took more rice from the brazier and placed it on the banana leaf she used as a plate. "Will we be expected to eat during the ceremony, or are the offerings eaten by the *mambo*?"

"The ones who are visited by the spirit of Damballah will eat the food. He makes himself known through the faithful. Food will also be scattered about the peristyle for the weak spirits; they are hungry also. None must be neglected. A *loa* is made angry if he has an empty belly."

Men and women from the other mountain villages gathered in the clearing to wait for the ceremony. It was a merry occasion, with the spirit of a celebration. Some carried food offerings in baskets atop their heads while others brought their contributions wrapped in banana leaves. The message drums beat a sonorous invitation throughout the muggy afternoon.

"When the moon rises, we'll begin," Marie told her.

Listening to Marie's explanation, Geneviève couldn't help imagining the horror this occasion would provoke among the *blancs* of Port-au-Prince. Perhaps, she thought with scorn, they feared the *mambo* would call up the spirits of their long-dead consciences. That would require a very powerful magic indeed, the girl thought wryly.

Geneviève sighed, perplexed. Even her dear Rachel and Guy-Pierre had been violently opposed to the practice of voodoo by their slaves. Though the ceremonies were not as prevalent in Savannah, they were feared by the plantation owners there as in Saint-Domingue. At this point, she realized how much her thinking had changed since her arrival in Saint-Domingue.

When the moon hung above the peaks surrounding the village, Marie called softly, "It's time." The girl had changed into a loose, white dress and wound her head in a tall turban of the same bleached cambric.

Geneviève couldn't deny a certain nervous anticipation as they fell in step with the others, making their way to the peristyle. With little effort, she soon felt comfortable with the excitement and enthusiasm of the group. The *rada* drums, used only in the ceremony, had begun a slow, compelling beat as the villagers gathered to sit on woven mats in a circle around the shelter.

Marie tugged Geneviève down to a seat beside her on the matting. On her left, Jeanette smiled and welcomed her warmly. Geneviève studied the peristyle with curiosity. Each wooden column supporting the thatched roof was heavily inscribed with the designs representing the *loa*, Damballah.

"See, Geneviève, these are the symbols I mentioned to you. Lightning and the serpent are drawn for Damballah. The center post of the peristyle is striped to represent the coils of a snake," Marie described. "Tonight, the ceremony will be very good. This is the *mambo* who drew the *vèvès* on the trail. She's wise, this one."

The peristyle was crowded with the dark faces of the *marrons*. Outside, others drifted among the trees, preparing for the ceremony. On the earth floor of the shelter, two white chickens, tethered at the leg, were set before a bowl of maize. These would be the sacrifice of the *loa*, Marie explained.

In the semidarkness, Geneviève studied the powerful figures of the three drummers as they set the tempo for the rituals to follow. Their drums were painted with the symbols of the *loa* in brilliant green, red, yellow and white.

"The drums are most important," Marie continued. "There are always three. The *manman* is the largest; this one is the leader. The *segond* and the *bula* are the background, you see."

"And the bell, Marie?"

"Yes, that's the *ogan*. It's struck with an iron rod to establish the rhythm."

With the rising of the moon, Geneviève could see more details inside the peristyle. But when her glance reached the rafters, she emitted a strangled shriek. For directly above her head, coiled loosely about a wooden beam, was the largest snake she had ever seen. Its enormous head lolled from the beam, moving slowly from side to side as though surveying the people below.

"Don't be concerned, Geneviève. He's a good snake." Marie laughed. The other women joined the mirth as Geneviève stared in horror at the rippling coils above her. "The good snake won't harm you. This is the spirit of Damballah."

"I see," Geneviève said hesitantly. "He's the good snake," she repeated determinedly, never taking her eyes from the reptile.

Slowly, as if satisfied with his examination of Geneviève, the snake slid languidly across the rafters to the far side of the

peristyle. A sigh of relief escaped her as the sleek coils moved away. But she continued to watch him warily.

"They're coming," Marie whispered. Her eyes shone with excitement, and her face was radiant. The moonlight caught the large, silver hoops she wore in her ears as her head swayed to the cadence of the drums.

The crowd parted to admit the tiny wrinkled figure of a woman clothed in a long, white muslin dress. Around her neck she wore a heavy ceremonial necklace of white china beads and shells. Her face was as small as a child's, but she carried herself with great dignity. She was obviously accustomed to the respect she was receiving from the *marrons*.

In one hand she carried a calabash of water, in the other a rattle adorned with silver bells. While her small feet moved to the rhythm of the drums, she offered a libation to each of the four points of the compass, then kissed the central post of the peristyle three times. She turned nimbly and bowed to honor the drums, kissing the ground three times. Rising, she struck the rattle on the ground before the drummers, then whirled to the center of the shelter.

"Now, she'll draw the *vèvès*, Geneviève," Marie said.

The gnarled hands of the mambo lifted a bowl of flour from the white cloth on the altar. Offering it to the four points first, she pinched the flour between her thumb and forefinger, sprinkling it to the ground. Slowly, the flour lines began to form a design of serpents and fanciful scrolls. When she had completed the *vèvès*, she lighted a wick floating in a bowl of oil and placed it in the center of the patterns.

The drummers, each playing in a different pitch, increased their tempo, producing a hypnotic counterpoint. At their signal, six women dressed in white entered chanting prayers in a tongue foreign to Geneviève. With their arrival, the swaying and moaning of the women near her increased. She found she was swaying with the crowd in spite of herself as the *mambo's* assistants danced, their feet and hips moving to the *manman* drum.

"Marie, what language are they speaking?"

"What?" Marie asked, her attention fixed on the dancers.

"Oh, it's *langage*, an African language understood only by the *loa*." She turned her eyes back to the dancers.

As the women twirled, their arms lifted above their heads, Geneviève could feel the excitement build within the peristyle. The *mambo* had lifted a long-handled forked stick to

the rafters and was coaxing the snake to twine its heavy body around the branch. When it had sluggishly coiled itself about the stick, the *mambo's* eyes closed in ecstasy and she twirled like a fury, puffs of dust rising from the ground about her bare feet. Offering the reptile to the crowd, she waited for the faithful to kiss the ground before the sacred serpent. Then she danced away to another part of the peristyle.

While the *mambo* circled with the snake held aloft, the *hounsies*, her assistants, gathered around the two white chickens at the center of the floor. They stroked the birds affectionately, gesturing and chanting in the melodious *language*.

"They're preparing the sacrifice, Geneviève," Marie explained. "If the animal won't take food and drink, then he has refused his part in the ceremony, and another animal will be used. The chicken is tempted to eat by an offering of guinea water, bits of cassava floating in a bowl of water."

Food offerings were brought to the altar by the faithful, as the *hounsies* attended to the sacrifice. Rice, eggs, sugared bananas, cinnamon milk and maize cakes were placed on the white altar cloth, having been offered first to the four corners of the peristyle.

Suddenly, the pace of the drums quickened to frenzy, their swelling tones whipping the crowd to a peak of emotion. Geneviève watched the quivering muscles of the drummers as their hands flailed out the beat. Sweat poured from their faces, and their eyes were rolled back in euphoria.

"The chickens have taken the food. Now the sacrifice will begin," Marie whispered.

The crowd moaned with excitement as the moment approached. The *mambo* darted across the floor to the fowl. Gravely, she bowed before them to kiss the ground, her fluffy white hair only inches from the white plumage of the birds. Rising, she took the neck of one bird in each hand, flung her arms up and out and snapped the heads from the bodies. The air exploded with the red and white of blood and feathers. Geneviève felt a ripple of nausea and dropped her eyes.

"It's over, Geneviève," Marie said. "Are you unwell?"

"No, I'm all right, Marie."

Marie nodded. "Now, Damballah will come to one of the faithful if he's pleased. Don't be frightened. The *hounsies* watch carefully over those possessed."

Quickly, the *hounsies* placed the fowl on the altar and



turned to be touched on the lips with the blood of the sacrifice. After they were annointed, the *mambo* shrieked and began to spin frantically. She turned faster and faster to the frenzied drumbeats, the crowd accompanying her delirium with a chant which sounded to Geneviève like "abobo." The chant was followed by a sigh in which the faithful struck their mouths with the centers of their palms.

Suddenly, the *mambo* stopped. The old woman's features were taking on the appearance of a man. Geneviève drew in her breath in astonishment. Even the *mambo's* walk had become that of an elderly man. Slowly, he inspected the crowd, which was crying out in rapture.

"Damballah," Marie hissed tensely.

With careful steps, he approached the corner where they sat. Standing directly before Geneviève, he looked down at her with calm, dark eyes. His small hand reached out to her. Geneviève turned to Marie with questioning eyes.

"Hold out your hand," the girl urged.

She extended her hand hesitantly. The hard, dry fingers gripped her wrist with a viselike pressure, and the girl's arm was raised and lowered four times, then dropped abruptly. The *mambo* moved back to the center of the floor, as the drums carried the crowd higher and higher.

A shriek broke from a woman behind them. Her tall thin figure burst through the circle of the crowd, spinning and pirouetting in the moonlight. Falling to the ground, she writhed across the floor hissing like a serpent. The *houns* gathered around to watch over her until the possession was spent.

Across the peristyle, a man leapt in the air, dancing furiously, his feet barely touching the ground. A hissing sound came from his lips. Leaping higher, he grasped the rafters of the shelter, pulled himself up, then dived headfirst to the floor, where he wriggled about in the attitude of a snake.

"Dieu, I thought he'd be killed," Geneviève gasped.

"No, he's Damballah now. It's safe for him." Marie smiled.

More and more dancers had taken to the floor as the throb of the drums beat still faster. As they danced, their hips, shoulders and knees moved with an undulating motion while their feet pounded out the rhythm of the *manman* drum. Those possessed by Damballah were partaking of the offering at the altar. The *mambo* offered bits of food to favored ones

in the crowd. Her small face still bore the male imprint of the spirit she carried.

"Geneviève, you've been fortunate," Marie told her. "When Damballah raised your hand to heaven, it was to bring good fortune to you. This is an honor."

"Marie, I didn't know what was expected of me." She laughed self-consciously.

"No matter, Damballah understands. The ceremony is over now. The dancing and feasting will go on through the night, but we need not stay."

"I'll go now, Marie. But you must stay and enjoy the feast."

Marie smiled. "You go then. I'll find Jean. You've seen what few whites have ever known, Geneviève."

"Thank you, Marie. I'll never forget this night. It would have been impossible without you."

Marie shrugged, laughing. "Now, there will be one white in Saint-Domingue who doesn't tremble at the word 'voodoo.' *Bonsoir.*"

## *Chapter 16*

"Monsieur McKenna, we should camp here. The trail into the mountains is treacherous in the darkness. We will wait for sunrise before riding further."

Seth nodded in agreement. He and Sebastien had made excellent progress since leaving Port-au-Prince. The cool evening and the wide, well-kept roads had made the journey much less demanding than he had expected. Having ridden rapidly across the Cul-de-Sac into the gentle swells of the foothills, Seth was willing to make camp until morning. He had also developed a raging hunger.

Sebastien had removed an iron pot from his pack and was squatting beside the fire stirring a meal of red beans and rice. Seth had not exchanged a word with the man until they had reached the foothills, where Sebastien had called a halt. This was just as well, he reasoned. He was memorizing the route they were taking, for he felt sure that the brooding guide had no intention of bringing him down from the mountains.

Seth's instincts told him that no ordinary man was acting as his guide. It was not so much Sebastien's appearance that disturbed him, though he looked sinister enough. No, an aura of evil hung about the man. He felt annoyed with himself for this fanciful thinking, but the feeling persisted. Evil or not, he concluded, this Sebastien is dangerous. There will be no sleep for me tonight.

They ate in silence the dried fish, beans and rice that Sebastien had prepared. The fire was hot on their faces, but the chill of the evening crept beneath their clothes as the moon washed away the color of the plain below. Had his companion been other than Sebastien, Seth would have enjoyed immensely this setting and the simple food.

His concern now could not be with the beauty of the countryside, though someday, he resolved, he would come back and record the vivid colors and startling contrasts of Saint-Domingue. His thoughts turned to Geneviève. What did she feel about this country? Had her experiences changed her in any way during the short time she had been here? And what had those experiences been? Seth couldn't for a moment entertain the possibility that Geneviève might not be alive. But the fear nagged at him. He stood abruptly and spoke to Sebastien.

"The ride to the *marron* camp, will it take long?"

"No, not long," Sebastien replied.

Seth sat down, leaned his head against his saddle and pulled a rough blanket over him. He would have to be watchful tonight, though he did not feel Sebastien would attack him so soon. No, he was sure the guide would wait until they had penetrated the mountains. The foothills didn't offer the isolation an assassin would seek. Even as they sat beside their fire tonight, several horsemen had passed by on the trail within hailing distance. He knew the attack would come in the mountains, tomorrow.

He woke from a light sleep to the screaming of parrots and the odor of boiling coffee. The dawn was overcast and a damp chill hung in the air. Sebastien sat by the small fire, warming his hands.

"*Monsieur*, we should start soon. I have made coffee, and there are maize cakes heating."

Seth pushed his unruly blond hair from his brow and joined Sebastien by the fire. He studied the guide's face, yet still he found the man inscrutable. From the beginning of the journey, Sebastien had seemed almost unaware of his companion. But Seth knew that this was a façade. Since he couldn't predict what Sebastien might do, he would be forced to play the man's game and wait. It was the waiting that was the most difficult.

Quickly, they devoured the simple meal and saddled their

horses. The smell of approaching rain permeated the foothills as they swung onto the narrow mountain trail. The undergrowth pressed so close to the trail in places that Sebastien was forced to hack away the encroaching branches and vines with a machete.

Seth was becoming more aware of the difficulties he would face if forced to find the *marron* village without the aid of a guide. Even in the short distance they had traveled, the trail had divided into small tracks several times. The mountains appeared to be a tangle of uncharted paths, so heavily overgrown with vegetation that a horseman would be upon a track before noticing its existence. He frowned in concentration as he searched for landmarks in the towering walls of green around him.

In their climb, they had passed only one traveler. A young black man leading a burro loaded with mangoes and bitter oranges had shown such terror of Sebastien that Seth's earlier anxiety returned. Was the guide known here?

Shortly after they had passed the boy, enormous rain drops began to fall, rattling and popping on the foliage bordering the trail. Looking out across the mountain range, Seth saw driving sheets of rain blowing toward them from the peaks. As the downpour struck, he groaned, turning up his collar against the relentless weather. Quickly, the red clay of the trail became a morass of slippery mud. Water poured down the mountain, swirling about the fetlocks of the horses and causing the animals to struggle for footing. Steam rose from their flanks, and their sides heaved with the effort of their climb against the beating rain.

"*Monsieur*, we will rest here. The horses need water," Sebastien called above the roar of the deluge.

Seth followed Sebastien from the trail into a ravine where a rushing stream, swollen by the rain, ran across lichen-covered granite outcroppings. The path of the water had cut through the stones to form a pool among the rocks.

Sebastien stood with his head bowed against the downpour as his horse sucked greedily from the pool. When the animal had had its fill, the *bocor* led him away from the water, threw the stirrup across the saddle, and pressed his knee against the horse's belly to tighten the saddle's girth.

While the guide was occupied, Seth released his mount to drink and bent over the pool to slake his own thirst. In one

smooth motion an arm slid around Seth's neck, snapping his head back against a well-muscled chest. Seth felt the rain pelting his upturned face. As he grappled frantically beneath his jacket for his pocket pistol, he could hear Sebastien's heavy breathing in his ear. When he could feel the butt of the small firearm, he wrenched violently to one side, slamming his elbow into the *bocor's* ribcage. Sebastien's grip failed and Seth wrenched free. Turning, he cocked the weapon, fired and watched as Sebastien fell back gripping his temple. Terrified by the shot, both horses fled up the trail, their reins flapping wildly.

Seth knelt beside the man. The bullet had only creased his skull above the temple. He was unconscious and bleeding freely, but the wound was only superficial. Sebastien would soon regain consciousness. However, the guide was not a concern for the moment, the horses were.

Without a horse Seth realized he had little chance of finding Geneviève. The guide had brought him through the most difficult terrain of the journey, and he felt that he could now manage alone if he had a mount.

Quickly, he removed Sebastien's knife from his belt, and started up the trail in pursuit of the horses. He cursed the riding boots he wore as he pressed through the mud of the trail. Their soft leather was not made for walking, and they slowed his progress.

The horses had sought shelter from the storm beneath a guava grove a short distance up the mountain. They stood quietly, their heads hanging and their tails to the wind. Seth approached them cautiously, talking in a low voice in order not to frighten them. As he reached for the sorrel mare, he stepped onto a rocky shelf at the edge of the trail. Too late he felt the ground give way beneath his boot and realized the heavy rain had undermined the boulders. Falling, he saw the horses wheel and race back down the trail out of sight. He landed with blinding pain in a heap of mud and rock, one foot sharply twisted beneath him.

Seth knew the damage to his ankle before he saw it. It wasn't broken, but the sprain was throbbing and already swelling rapidly. His boot, now much too tight, was causing unbearable pressure on his leg. He slit open the boot with Sebastien's knife and bound the flaps together with a pocket handkerchief. But when he stood, he found the ankle would

not bear his weight. Grasping a sapling, he hacked a make-shift staff to lean on and slowly began the painful climb to the trail.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, he pulled himself onto the trail. He was smeared with mud from his slide, and wet to the skin. As he stood gasping for breath from his efforts, a faint noise reached him from the trail below. It could be the horses, he thought. But that was unlikely. They would have run a short distance, then sought shelter as before. He could think of only one other possibility.

Seth was aware of the gravity of his situation. His small pistol was useless except at close range. And with his injured leg, he could easily be overwhelmed by the large *bocor*. Rapidly, he decided to hide himself and hoped that Sebastien would pass him by.

One side of the trail was nearly vertical, rising to a sheer stone face that offered no concealment. The other edge, down which he had slid, held only the grove of guava trees and a few shrubs. Ruefully he realized he would have to conceal himself behind the small bushes and hope that Sebastien would not spot him through the driving rain.

The sound of horses approaching became louder, and he had only enough time to slip behind the nearest shrub before the *bocor* rode into view. He had bound his head with strips of cloth and seemed no worse for his wound. He was riding slowly, leading the other horse by a rope and searching the sides of the trail as he went.

Seth tensed from behind his scanty hiding place, trying desperately not to move. The guide appeared to be looking directly into his eyes as he rode closer, but he passed and continued up the track in his search. When he could hear nothing but the hiss of the rain, Seth struggled to the shelter of the copse and gave way to the pain in his body.

He cursed himself furiously for his carelessness. He knew he should never have turned his back on Sebastien, even for a moment. But there was nothing to be done now, he thought bitterly. He was injured and without a mount. He would be little help to Geneviève now. He could try to continue up the mountain or give up and attempt to make his way back to Port-au-Prince. But he knew he could do nothing until the storm had passed. He stared out at the sheets of rain from under a roof of thick branches and cursed himself again. His greatest concern was not for his safety. He was confident in

his ability to survive. But Geneviève. If Sebastien should find her, could she survive?

A happy atmosphere pervaded the *marron* camp. The torrential rains of the previous day had left the air fresh and crisp and the foliage clear of the clinging white dust of the drought. The gardens, which had shriveled in the heat, producing only stunted vegetables, would now flourish. In the forests, the guava, mango and bitter orange trees would grow heavy with fruit again. This was cause for celebration.

Darkness had descended on the village, and the only light in the clearing came from the flickering cookfires. Families sat before their huts telling stories to sleepy children. A woman rose from the circle of her family to dance to a soft, melodious drumbeat. Another joined her, encouraged by the rhythmic clapping of the villagers.

Geneviève smiled as she watched their spontaneity. Laughter rippled across the clearing as other women were pulled to their feet to dance. Sitting before the doorway of their hut, Geneviève and Marie joined the spirit of the *marrons*, clapping and swaying to the drum beat.

Geneviève couldn't remember having spent a more pleasant day here. Shortly after sunrise, she and Marie had gone with the other women in the camp to search for fruit. Following the rains, orchids, hibiscus and other exotic flowers had burst into bloom. She was amazed at the colors and astonishing size of the blossoms. The group had left the trail, wandering through the brilliant green vegetation, laughing and playing like children. Geneviève had tucked up her skirts like the other women and climbed the trees to shake the ripe fruit to the ground. The women had laughed with delight at her attempt to balance a basket of avocados on her head. They had returned to the camp tired and happy, with several large baskets of avocados and bitter oranges.

With the light of the fire illuminating her face, Geneviève was more beautiful than ever. Her face and arms were golden from the sun, and her tawny hair was caught up with a spray of pale green orchids that Marie had twined about her head. The effects of the fever had faded and she was healthy and glowing in her white muslin dress.

Marie noticed the sparkle of her green eyes and turned to her, smiling. "The mountains have been good to you, yes?"

"Yes, Marie," she answered. "I'd come to hate this island



but never again could I feel hatred for Saint-Domingue. The Frenchmen are not Saint-Domingue. You and Jean and these people are the true island."

"When you've left, you'll think of us with kindness?"

"When I go, I'll feel sadness. I can never know this again, Marie. It won't be possible for me to sit before the fire with you or Jean or my other friends in this way. It's a sweet memory I'll carry with me always, my friend." Geneviève reached for Marie's hand. Their two small palms clasped as they turned back to the dancers.

Jean slipped into the circle of their firelight and the three sat watching the dance in silence. While their attentions were fixed on the women, the drum abruptly fell silent and the dancers were suddenly still. Only the crackle of the fire could be heard in the clearing.

"Geneviève, go into the *caille*," Marie said softly.

The urgent tone of the girl's voice caused Geneviève to turn toward her with curiosity. Marie and Jean were both staring across the camp, into the shadows of the trees beyond. Halted at the edge of the clearing was a man sitting a horse and leading another.

"Why should I go inside?" she questioned. Geneviève felt no alarm, though the man stared fixedly at her.

"He's a *bocor*. He carries the *maldioque*, the evil eye. That's why the others don't want to attract his attention. He means no good here, please go in."

Geneviève ducked quickly inside the *caille*. From the hut she could still see the man across the clearing and she could hear Jean and Marie's voices. The *maldioque*. She remembered Marie telling her of the evil eye, which some people were thought to possess. Often, when a very beautiful child was born, the parents would mutilate the infant to render it less attractive to the *maldioque*. She recalled the discussion had begun when she had asked Marie why some of the *marrons* wore a half-moon design on the cheek. The *cocotte* had explained that the design was used to ward off the effect of the evil eye. The figure was much like a tattoo, but it was applied with a caustic vegetable sap.

Still, she felt no anxiety. She couldn't imagine that this magician could mean harm to her. But when she heard Marie's words, a knot of fear constricted her throat.

"That's the *bocor* who visited one of the other camps, Jean. The women told me he asked after a white woman."

"He searches for Geneviève, then," Jean said. As he spoke to Marie, he never took his eyes from the figure riding slowly toward them.

The *marrons* moved away at the man's approach, slipping out of sight into their *cailles*. Seeing the *bocor's* brutal face by firelight, Jean and Marie stood in one movement, barring the door to the hut. The man looked down at them, smiling. The smile appeared so unnatural that Marie was certain of the danger before he spoke.

"I am Sebastien. You will bring the girl out to me." His voice was soft, almost casual in tone, but his eyes were cold and flat.

"Go away. There's nothing here for you." Jean's voice was defiant.

Sebastien dismounted, moving with the slow, sure grace of an animal. When he reached his adversary, he poised as if listening, then swung his fist against Jean's head with tremendous force. He crumpled against the *caille*, blood trickling from his mouth. With a cry, Marie dropped to her knees, cradling her brother's head.

"Geneviève, *run*," she screamed.

Sebastien kicked her aside viciously. Marie gasped in agony as she fell beside Jean, clutching her side.

Terrified, Geneviève attempted to escape from the *caille*. But the *bocor* filled the doorway, the strange smile still on his face. She backed against the far wall of the hut. If I can draw him inside away from the doorway, she thought desperately, perhaps I can reach the door. As Sebastien moved toward her, she counted the seconds, waiting for the instant when she could break free. The *bocor* took another step and she leapt around him. She was in the doorway when she felt her head snapped backward. She was falling, and she fought wildly to maintain her balance. Sebastien still gripped the tawny skein of her hair as he dragged her down onto Marie's sleeping mat. She screamed with fury as she felt his body lower to hers. *No*, her mind raged. *No!*

Frantically, her fingers clawed at the clay floor of the hut, seeking any weapon she might use against him. As his hands tore at her, she slipped her palm beneath the mat and touched the cool sharp blade of Marie's knife.

## Chapter 17

Geneviève stared at the crimson-stained skirt of her white dress. Trembling uncontrollably, she attempted to wipe the sticky blood from her hand. She was vaguely puzzled by the numbness in her palms as they touched the fabric of her gown. Blankly, she studied the vivid pattern of her palm print on the pale muslin.

"*Mademoiselle?*"

She raised her head slowly to see Jean supporting himself against the doorway of the *caille*. He wiped his bleeding mouth with his sleeve, then came to kneel attentively before her.

"*Mademoiselle,*" he asked gently, "Are you injured?" He placed his hand on the girl's arm, turning her toward him to study her face.

At Jean's touch, the confusion in Geneviève's mind fell away. "Jean, I've killed him."

Turning toward the body of Sebastien, Jean spat on the ground with contempt. "It's not a man you've killed, but an animal. You couldn't have done otherwise."

"He's hurt you Jean?" She had noticed his bleeding lip. "And Marie. What about Marie?"

"I'm all right, but we must see to Marie. I'll take care of this," he said, lifting Sebastien's feet.

She rose unsteadily as Jean dragged the *bocor* roughly from the *caille* to the center of the clearing. One by one, the

villagers emerged from their huts to gather in a circle of anxious faces around Geneviève where she knelt beside Marie. Jeanette stepped from the crowd and bent to cradle Marie's head in her powerful arms.

"Jeanette, the *bocor* has broken her ribs. We'll need to bind her, but first we'll have to move her into a hut. Lift her carefully," she warned the men who bent over the injured girl.

Marie moaned with pain as the men carried her inside Jeanette's *caille*. After they had gently lowered her to a sleeping mat, Geneviève cut away the girl's dress and bound her ribs tightly.

"Marie must drink this, *mademoiselle*," Jeanette said, holding a cup to the girl's lips. "It's a mixture of strong herbs. They'll bring sleep, and when she wakes, the pain will be less."

Geneviève sat on the floor beside the mat, holding Marie's small hand as she slept. As she watched the shallow breathing of her friend, her eyes clouded with concern. The village grew quiet and its inhabitants returned to their *cailles* to sleep, but still Jeanette and Geneviève watched over Marie. With the passing of the hours, Marie slept more comfortably and no longer cried out from the pain.

"She's resting easier?" Jean asked, having returned from his task.

"Yes, Jean, Jeanette gave her a potion, and she's much quieter."

"That's good." His face smoothed in relief. "We must talk, now, *mademoiselle*."

She followed him outside to the fire before Jeanette's hut. Wearily, she poured coffee for them and turned to face her friend.

"*Mademoiselle*, obviously someone knows of your presence in the mountains. It's no longer safe for you to remain here."

"But, Jean, I can't leave Marie."

"You must think of yourself, *mademoiselle*. If you stay, you'll surely be killed. Another will be sent for you."

Had it not been for me, Geneviève thought, Marie wouldn't have been injured, nor would Jean have been attacked. The realization caused her pain.

"You're right, Jean. It's time I left for Port-au-Prince. Only there can I find a means to return to Savannah."

"I'll go with you and see that you're protected until you can find a way to your home."

"What about Marie?"

"Jeanette and the other women will care for her, *mademoiselle*. She'll be whole again soon."

The *marron* camps were spread out in an undefined network throughout the mountains of Saint-Domingue. Jean-Baptiste had no idea where to begin the search for Geneviève other than in the tangled wilds of the mountains at the northern end of the Cul-de-Sac, the area closest to the Crevaux plantation.

Inquiries would have to be made with great tact. Though he wasn't one of the hated whites and he had contacts among the *marrons*, they didn't fully trust a person of color either. After his first encounter with the reticence of the *marrons*, Jean-Baptiste decided that that it would be better to approach them alone and have Judson stay out of sight. They spent a day and a half searching in this time-consuming fashion before they gained any useful information.

Judson had become increasingly agitated each time Jean-Baptiste returned to report failure. He felt that every hour they delayed exposed Geneviève to greater danger. Finally, they met with success. An acquaintance of Jean-Baptiste was persuaded that the information was vital and that no harm was meant toward the woman sought or the *marrons*.

As they returned through territory previously searched, Judson felt his exhaustion evaporate with hope that they were finally nearing their goal.

Near noon, Jean-Baptiste became aware of the tantalizing aroma of fried pork and roasting coffee even before they rode into the clearing. Beneath a stand of mahogany trees stood a thatched pavilion where two black women were busy over a huge smoke-blackened cauldron.

Jean-Baptiste looked longingly at the strips of fried pork heaped on banana leaves waiting to be dispensed to hungry travelers. For a pittance they could enjoy a sumptuous feast at this remote travelers' rest. He glanced at Judson to see if he was receptive to the idea. But the determined set of his companion's jaw dashed that hope.

They had advanced only a mile from the cooking pavilion when they saw the *marrons*. Four of them came into view,

descending the steep trail and bearing an unwieldy litter. Jean-Baptiste held out his hand, cautioning Judson to follow no further.

"I'm not sure what this means, Judson. But perhaps I should approach them alone."

Judson nodded in agreement, then watched as Jean-Baptiste rode slowly up to the men. He could overhear nothing of their conversation, though their animated gestures revealed a passionate exchange. His attention was drawn to the blond man carried on the litter. He appeared to be a gentleman, though his clothes were torn and muddy. Judson's curiosity increased when Jean-Baptiste dismounted and helped the injured man onto his horse.

"We're in luck, my friend," Jean-Baptiste said when he rejoined Judson. "These men have agreed to escort me into the mountains. But I must go alone. When I've won their confidence, I'll seek more specific information concerning our problem, yes?"

"Yes, Jean-Baptiste," Judson responded quickly. "I'll await your return at the travelers' rest." He scrutinized the conspicuously silent man astride his friend's horse.

"This gentleman has been injured, Judson. He wishes to accompany you. I've given him my mount, as it's best that I travel on foot with the *marrons*. Don't worry so." He smiled at Judson's skeptical expression. "All will be well."

A great effort was required of Seth to sit calmly waiting for his companion to return from the pavilion with their meal. He thought of Geneviève and the precious time passing in which the *bocor* might have reached the village of the *marrons*. His intention was to take the horse and return to the mountains as quickly as possible. He wouldn't have time to explain his situation to this dark-haired stranger who was so kindly assisting him. Besides, he felt that it would be unwise to trust anyone.

When the food, in great quantities, was set before him, he began to eat, all the while casting about for a way to elude his companion. He reasoned that the man would take a dim view of his making off with the loaned horse. He smiled at the irony of his need to turn horse thief. It couldn't be helped, he concluded, but how was it to be done? Oddly, the man seemed to be watching him with a cautious eye.

Judson sat cross-legged, eating the pork and rice with his fingers, and watched the man across from him. He appeared to be uncomfortable under his gaze. Judson wondered why he should have this advantage. They weren't enemies, at least not to his knowledge. And why was he choosing to be so uncommunicative? Judson began to enjoy the silence as a game. He would wait with supreme patience for the other man to speak first.

A fighting cock circled the two men, seemingly drawn to the tension between them and anticipating a fight. When the fight did not materialize, the cock began to make daring dives at their food. A sly-faced, diminutive man suddenly appeared and shooed the bird away. He offered the men a clay bottle of clairin, the powerful raw rum of the colony. Judson smiled to himself as he purchased a bottle and offered it to his mute companion. Perhaps, he thought, the rum would loosen the man's tongue.

Seth took a swig and handed it back. It occurred to him then that if his companion could be induced to drink enough of this potent liquid, he might be more easily caught off guard. He called for another bottle, toasted his companion, and laughingly tipped it up. Judson joined him. Each drank sparingly while pretending to take great quantities to encourage the other. Since their actions and purpose were identical, it wasn't long before they saw the futility of their efforts.

Judson set his bottle down heavily in the dirt. "Let's stop this ridiculous game, *monsieur*. May I ask what you have to gain by getting me drunk?"

"I may ask the same of you," countered Seth politely. "Surely, you're not concerned solely with diminishing the pain in my ankle?"

"And I don't think you're so hungry you wish to distract me from the food."

Seth looked at Judson for a moment; then, slowly and deliberately, set down his own bottle. "Dammit, sir, I have no time for pretense. I need your horse. Let me buy it from you. I'll give you far more than it's worth."

Judson was puzzled by this sudden outburst and the anxiety that lay behind it. "It's not my horse to sell, *monsieur*. If you merely need a mount, you may return with us to Port-au-Prince and purchase one there. What's your destination?"

Seth evaded the question. "I have no time to return to

Port-au-Prince. My business is urgent. I'm certain you can make arrangements with your friend. So, sir, what do you say?"

"If my friend is successful in his endeavor, we'll need both our mounts. I'm sorry, *monsieur*, but your request is impossible."

"You can't ride double for so short a time?"

"If all goes well, one of us will be riding double already," he answered, his voice showing signs of irritation. He had now become even more suspicious of this man's behavior. "What, precisely, is your business in the north?"

"It's a private matter."

"Your concern may be private, *monsieur*, but you look as if you might need some help."

Seth looked hard at Judson. There was something in his eyes that inspired trust. He began to ponder the fact that only Madame Bourget knew of his purpose here in the mountains, and she had no reason to believe that Sebastien had failed in his instructions. Perhaps he should trust this stranger. Besides, time was wasting. He could at least sound him out.

"Tell me, sir, what is your business here?" asked Seth tentatively.

Judson did not want to commit himself, but he had begun to think that this blond-haired American couldn't be an enemy. He did not look like a hireling of the Comte d'Villiers. "I've come in search of a friend," he said simply.

"As I have, sir. The problem is that I fear for my friend's safety, and I feel the greatest possible haste. I fell from my horse yesterday and lost him. As you see, I'm unable to proceed on foot. Sir, I *must* have a horse!"

Judson was intrigued by this information and probed further. "Who is your friend?"

Seth hesitated only a moment before he answered, "She is my fiancée." He watched Judson closely for his reaction.

"You're searching these mountains for a white woman?" Judson asked, not masking his astonishment.

"I am. It's quite an unusual situation, isn't it?"

"It's more than unusual, *monsieur*. What is her name?" he demanded, knowing full well the answer but having no idea how it could be so.

"Her name makes no difference. Why is it important to you?"



"Because, *monsieur*, we are searching for the same woman."

Seth tensed his body for a confrontation. If this man were searching for Geneviève, then he must have been sent by Madame Bourget. He was furious with himself for incautiously revealing anything. He checked the position of the horses for the possibility of a quick escape. But Judson's threatening voice interrupted his thoughts.

"How do you know her?"

"Whom do you think I'm looking for?" asked Seth, trying to appear unperturbed.

"Geneviève d'Binet," answered Judson, no longer able to hold back a direct accusation. The man's face confirmed it. "What do you seek from her?"

Seth recognized the protectiveness in Judson's manner. He knew then that he had no connection with Madame Bourget. "I've told you sir. She is my betrothed. I seek only her safety. Now I'll ask you the same question."

Judson ignored him. "I've known Geneviève but a short time, yet I've never heard her speak of a fiancé."

Seth felt a surge of rage at this slur. "If she has not mentioned me, I'm quite confident there's good reason. And if you think I've been biding my time since she was kidnapped, you are grossly misinformed. Sir," he added, "you have yet to tell me who you are."

"My name is Judson Talbot. I only met Geneviève a short while ago, when I first came to this island."

Out of habit, Seth started to extend his hand, but then withdrew it. "Seth McKenna of Savannah. Geneviève is not only my betrothed. We have been inseparable friends since childhood."

*Seth.* Judson was stunned to hear the name in connection with Geneviève's. His mind reeled. Seth and Geneviève, *Seth and Genny of Savannah*. It couldn't be mere coincidence. His most dreaded supposition was finally confirmed, and burned through his consciousness like smoldering coals. Judson's skin was hot with self-loathing. How could he admit to Seth who he was and what he had done to Geneviève?

Seth was puzzled by the sudden pallor of Judson's face. "What's the matter? Surely, you don't know my name. You just said Geneviève had never mentioned me."

Judson's voice was even. He knew the truth must come out now. "I said my name would mean nothing to you, Seth

McKenna. That part is true. But we are not strangers. I have something very troubling to tell you."

Seth waited for Judson to continue. He feared the worst. "What do you mean?" he prodded in a shaky voice.

"It's a strange story, Seth, hardly believable. I met you ten years ago when you and Genny surprised me in your cellar."

Seth looked hard at Judson's features, trying to make the connection. Ten years ago . . . during the battle of Savannah. The boy, he remembered. The runaway British youth, the one they had helped to the French lines.

"What you say is astounding," said Seth, his forehead creased in disbelief.

"Remember the boat we took? The one left tied to the dock by that man who had just delivered a commode to his ridiculous wife across the river?"

Seth's brow relaxed and his eyes crinkled in the sudden delight of recognition. "It truly is you." He laughed. "But you never came back as you promised," he added, serious once again. "We thought . . . well, we didn't know what to think."

"I was required to sail for France before I had a chance to contact you."

"So," Seth said with a wry smile, "Geneviève finally found you again, as she so often spoke of doing." His smile faded just as suddenly as it had appeared. "But you said you had something troubling to say."

Judson had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he took a deep breath and began. "She found me, Seth, but the occasion wasn't a happy one. What I'm going to tell you will not be pleasant for either of us. I ask only that you listen to the entire story before you form an opinion." He took a deep breath. "I had just arrived in Port-au-Prince when I became acquainted with a certain Madame Bourget."

Seth winced at the mention of her name. "I've met her," he said derisively.

"Then you know the sort of woman with which I was dealing. I didn't, at the time. When I left her salon that night, I was drunk. I drank even more when I returned to my ship. Then, to my utter surprise, I found she had sent me a woman. Knowing Bourget's reputation, I simply assumed the woman was sent for my pleasure. I didn't recognize her, Seth. And the drinking. . . ."

Seth felt sick. "You're not telling me she was Geneviève?"

"Yes," Judson admitted, "I am." His blue eyes seemed drained of life.

Anger engulfed Seth before he could think. Without skill or cunning, he lunged at Judson, his face crimson with rage.

Judson saw Seth in a blur above him as he fought to pull the man's hands from their deathlike grip on his neck. Seth was astride him and had the advantage. But Judson gathered all his strength, swung his legs high, grasped Seth's head between his knees and yanked. Seth grunted in pain and tumbled backward. Instantly, Judson was on him, pinning the slightly smaller man to the ground. The veins in his face and neck bulged as he strained to hold down his opponent. The fighting cock, excited by their struggle, now darted in to peck at them, but was quickly scooped up and whisked away by the sly-faced man.

"Think, Seth," Judson pleaded, raggedly gasping for breath. "Geneviève is in trouble. She needs both of us now. Let's see to her first, then you can punish me all you please. I swear to you, I only want to help her."

Still struggling, Seth spoke from behind clenched teeth. "I can't see how she needs help from you."

"She needs any help she can get."

The two men glared at each other. Slowly, they began to relax, and Seth reluctantly conceded that Judson was right. There wasn't much he could do alone at this point. "Get off me," he demanded. "We don't have much time. She's in more danger than you know."

"What do you mean?" asked Judson, brushing the dirt from his clothes.

Seth rolled over and got up on one knee. Massaging the blood back into his arms, he said, "I found out that it was Madame Bourget who had Guy-Pierre murdered. When I confronted her with proof of her guilt, she agreed to take me to Geneviève in return for my silence. She sent me off with a guide who, at the first opportunity, tried to kill me. I got away, but . . ."

"And you think he'll try to kill Geneviève as well?"

"Yes. He knows where to find her. I tried to stop him, Judson. If this hadn't happened," he indicated his ankle, "I would have."

Judson turned his gaze to the mountains towering above them. "I told Jean-Baptiste that we would wait here for him,

but I don't think we can. Time is too precious now. We'll have to try to find him and explain. It's our only chance."

Seth's concern for Geneviève's life tempered for the moment his hatred for Judson. The trail was narrow and demanding, and they were forced to ride slowly and close together. The situation gave Judson the opportunity to relate, in painful detail, the events to which Geneviève had been subjected since her arrival in Saint-Domingue. Seth listened, his resentment and bitterness increasing with each new revelation. It was a horror story almost beyond his imagination. Yet, as he listened, he recognized that Judson's culpability was not as great as it had seemed at first. Everything he said, if it contained any truth at all, only confirmed what he already knew of Madame Bourget. It began to appear that Judson, too, had been a victim of her twisted mind. And Geneviève, his innocent Geneviève, had been paying the price for Bourget's evil machinations. He dug his heels into the ribs of his already laboring mount. If we're too late, he vowed, if Geneviève is lost, Simone Bourget will die by my own hand before dawn.

When they passed the place where Seth and Sebastien had fought, their progress was further slowed by the necessity to stop and search the many surrounding trails for signs of recent trampling. The sun was low in the sky and their clothes were drenched with sweat when they heard the sound of someone crashing through the lush undergrowth ahead of them. Both men reached for their weapons.

"Jean-Baptiste!" cried Judson when he saw his golden-skinned companion emerge from the brush. "Thank God it's you!"

"You had doubts about my abilities, Judson? Is that why you couldn't wait for me? You might have easily become lost and delayed us hopelessly." Jean-Baptiste had been running, but he had trained his body for exertion and was breathing with ease. Warily, he eyed Seth.

"I'm sorry, Jean-Baptiste, but Seth informed me of a plot to have Geneviève murdered. Madame Bourget sent a man for that express purpose. . . ."

"That man is dead," interrupted Jean-Baptiste. "But who is this Seth?"

"He's a friend. Seth McKenna," Judson introduced him,

"He's Geneviève's betrothed." The word caught in his throat.

Jean-Baptiste's brow wrinkled in incredulity. "I'm certain I'll understand this when you have the time to explain it further. For now, we must return immediately to Port-au-Prince. Your Geneviève, or *his* Geneviève," he smiled and nodded toward Seth, "has gone there only this morning with Jean of Pacifique to obtain passage on a ship."

Seth leaned forward on his horse. "But how can she do that without being recognized?"

"Exactly, *monsieur*. I don't think she can."

## Chapter 18

A black man and a thin youth entered Port-au-Prince from the direction of the Cul-de-Sac. The black man wore an eye patch and a filthy rag around his head, covering his hair. The youth was white and looked underfed in his baggy canvas breeches and bulky, loose-fitting over-shirt. He wore a sailor's knitted cap pulled low over his head. Both rode exceptionally fine mounts. Anyone observing them probably would conclude that they came overland from Le Cap to escape the charge of horse thievery. But in the darkness, they attracted no undue attention.

They rode immediately to the area of the waterfront known as Thieves' Market, which operated only at night. Its lively transactions required the cover of darkness. The youth held both horses, while the other studied the milling clumps of men, finally approaching a small group of well-dressed *grands blancs*. He opened negotiations with them in an obsequious manner, pointing to the horses from time to time. Presently, he returned, accompanied by one of the men.

"Which of these nags is for sale, boy?"

The black man quickly answered, "We have no nags for sale, *monsieur*, only these blooded mares. The choice is yours. They are of equal quality."

The man stepped forward to inspect the horses. "What's wrong with your skinny friend here? Has he no tongue?" He laughed heartily.

"Yes, *monsieur*, the boy has never had the gift of speech."

"Of course," the man goaded. "Why would he *need* to speak when he has such a honey-tongued black devil as you to do it for him?"

When the black man did not respond, the *grand blanc* stroked his chin and asked, "Tell me, who will recognize either of these horses in the light of day?"

The black man smiled. "No one, *monsieur*. Not even their dams."

"How much then?"

When Jean told him, the man roared. "But you said you only wished to sell one horse, not an entire stable!"

"*Monsieur* knows the value of these horses."

"Yes, and I also know the value of your freedom. Even this is too much, but I have nothing smaller with me. Take it and be glad." He threw a large coin into the dirt at their feet and led away one of the horses. When he had gone, the youth reached to retrieve the coin.

"Good work, Jean," praised Geneviève. "This will be enough."

Jean turned to her, his fists clenched at his side. "I shake with rage at having to make such a deal. Even as Crevaux's *slave* I received more respect!"

"Come, Jean," Geneviève soothed, touching his arm. "There's too much to be done to think of this now."

"You will ride, *mademoiselle*?"

"I'd rather walk with you. The closer we are together, the safer I'll feel."

They walked twice along the waterfront, but to no avail. There was no one loading cargo at this late hour, nor were there any sailors about with loose tongues. The only sailors they encountered were either too drunk or too infatuated with the women on their arms to care where their ships lay.

"What now, Jean?"

"If I could only get into one of the taverns. That's where the ones who can yet talk will be. But, I'm not permitted."

"Then I must do it."

"No, *mademoiselle*. It's impossible for you to go alone."

"I think you exaggerate, Jean." She smiled. "Nevertheless, the chance must be taken. I promise not to antagonize anyone while I'm there," she teased.

Jean was beside himself with anxiety as they stood in the shadows across the narrow street from the Hanged Man

Tavern. Geneviève was determined to go in alone. She held out the money to him.

"This will be safer with you," she whispered.

"*Mademoiselle*," he pleaded, "if you would only wait, I think . . ."

Geneviève put her finger to her lips to indicate silence. "Wait for me here."

She entered the tavern. The smell was an overpowering mixture of ale, sweat, mutton grease and vomit. The air was also filled with a cacophony of voices and was heavy with smoke. There was no way to move about without pushing someone aside, and she was trying to avoid physical contact. So she moved slowly, insinuating herself into any opening that appeared without her having to force it. Much of the conversation she overheard was incoherent or embarrassing, but she steeled her ears as well as her nose.

She had been inside the tavern for a full fifteen minutes and she knew Jean would be worrying. Then she heard it. *English*. The voices were American and, harsh as they were, were music to her ears.

"Aye about the women, Johnny. It's the damned heat that's killing me. I'm not made for it."

"You'll get back to your blessed freezing Boston soon enough, Tillman. And to your whoring wife."

The man called Tillman simply threw the contents of his cup into the other man's face as easily as if he had been saying hello. Two other men jumped up and wrenched the dripping Johnny's arms behind his back. "Ease off, Johnny. You asked for it." Johnny spit at Tillman but missed.

"Take him back to the *Bonny Jane*, boys. We sail in a few hours and he's due for first watch."

"Aye, Tillman," said one of the men manhandling Johnny. "Where are we going this time?"

"Same as always. Charleston, Baltimore and some other rat-infested port before home." Tillman spat on the floor and called out loudly for another drink.

Geneviève felt a thrill of satisfaction. Charleston! It would be close enough. Both Guy-Pierre and her father had had business contacts in that city, and she would have no trouble soliciting the money to see her to Savannah. Now that she had her information, she would make her way out the same way she had come in, by tedious waiting and dodging.

The door was only a few steps away when a man suddenly



lurched toward her. Darting quickly aside to avoid a collision, she landed on someone's foot and, for a fearful moment, lost her balance. She righted herself but felt a pain in her elbow where she had knocked it against something hard.

"That was my head, you stupid oaf!" The voice came from behind her, and so did a large hand, which clamped itself onto her arm.

Geneviève looked up into an angry, bearded face and almost blurted out an apology before she could stop herself. She didn't dare speak out, or they would know she was a woman.

The barmaid was standing nearby and saw what was happening. "Leave him be, sailor," she warned. "That little whelp could hardly have injured you."

"He struck me in the head, woman, and I want to know why." He jerked Geneviève's arm tighter and she groaned in pain.

"Don't hurt him, now," the woman soothed. "I fancy him, and you might put him out of commission."

"And what could you do with a scrawny piglet such as this but change his diapers?" The man was laughing now, as was the audience the scene had attracted.

"I like them young and innocent," she cooed, coming up to Geneviève and pinching her cheek.

The man released his hold on her and stood back to see what would happen next. "And tell us what you do with them," he shouted, egging her on.

"I *teach* them." She smiled widely, displaying several gaps where teeth should have been. She let her hand play down the front of Geneviève's shirt.

"What would he want to learn from a hag like you?" There was a roar of laughter, but the woman paid no attention. She was staring squint-eyed at Geneviève. Then she threw back her head and cackled.

Geneviève's eyes darted about the room. The door was open and she could see Jean, his face a mask of fear as he gazed in at her predicament. She had to make her move quickly. Both she and the woman lunged at the same time, Geneviève for the door, and the barmaid for Geneviève's shirt.

"*He's a woman!*" she cried, tugging at the shirt.

Geneviève struggled with the woman and wrenched away to the sound of ripping cloth. The momentum caused her to

stumble backward out of the door, her shirt torn and the material with which she had insufficiently bound her breasts still in the barmaid's hands. The men were so concerned with gaping at her breasts that no one thought to run after her. Jean had mounted the horse and, in a running swoop, grabbed her by the waist and galloped into the darkness.

He didn't stop until they had reached the southern limit of town at a deserted beach crowded with mangoes and coconut palms. He released Geneviève gently to the ground, where she immediately went to work repairing her shirt.

Jean looked out across the sea. "This will be a safe place for a few hours, *mademoiselle*."

"Thank you, Jean," she said breathlessly. She smiled to herself and sat in the sand. "A few hours is all we have. The *Bonny Jane* sails for Charleston then, and I plan to be aboard her."

An hour before dawn they were waiting on the waterfront for any sign of activity on the *Bonny Jane*. They knew that before she could sail, she would have to be cleared by the harbor master. They planned to row out with him at the last moment.

As the cocks began to herald the dawn, Geneviève, who was resting her head on her drawn-up knees, was nudged by Jean. He pointed to the ship, where a small boat was being lowered over the side. They watched as two men rowed it up to the beach. One of them stood placidly by the boat while the other, obviously agitated, paced a few feet away. When Jean saw the harbor master join them, he quickly scrambled close enough to overhear their conversation.

"You wish to be cleared, captain?" asked the official in shaky English.

"Sir, I wish nothing *more* than to be cleared to sail out of this sweat box. My problem is that the infamous lures of your tawdry city have prevented the return of over half my crew!"

"Yes, *monsieur*. This is a common complaint. Do you have your papers?"

The *Bonny Jane's* captain withdrew a folded sheaf of papers from his belt and handed them over. "Have you any suggestions, sir, about my crew?"

The harbor master studied the papers intently. "Everything here is in order, *monsieur*. Shall I inspect your ship now, so that you may be cleared when your crew is restored?"

With a frustrated flourish of his hand, the captain said, "Yes, yes. Go ahead. Tillman, my mate, is aboard."

The harbor master called back over his shoulder as he was leaving, "You might search for your missing men in our fine jail, *monsieur*."

Jean ran up to the captain before he could depart. "Pardon me, Monsieur Captain. I would like to book a passage to Charleston."

The captain turned in anger to face this new interruption and found Jean offering the money in his outstretched hand. "Passage for you?" he asked derisively. "I may need you as crew, so hold your money."

"No, Monsieur Captain, not for me. It's for my mute friend there." He pointed to Geneviève, who stood holding the horse's reins.

"Mute, you say? Can he work?"

"Oh, no. He's both deaf and dumb."

"I see."

"How much, Monsieur Captain?"

"You just happen to have the exact amount right there in your hand, my good man. Has the lad any baggage?"

"No baggage."

"Then have him wait here for me and I'll ferry him out when I return." He grabbed the money and was gone.

"There's no money left, *mademoiselle*," Jean apologized when he returned to Geneviève. "I think he's probably cheating us as well."

"Never mind that, Jean. I'll be able to raise more money when I reach Charleston. Where was the captain going?"

"To find his crew. Now it will be mid-morning before she sails. We're to wait for him here. And you're to be deaf and dumb for the voyage. I was forced to tell him that or he would have you as part of his crew."

"Good. Then I'll be left alone. I'll roll my eyes like an idiot and perhaps they'll ignore me all together."

"If only I could come along, *mademoiselle*."

"Thank you, Jean, but I'll be fine. You must see to Marie as soon as I leave. I can't stop worrying for her safety. As soon as I get home, I'll send for both of you, if you agree."

By ten o'clock, the captain of the *Bonny Jane* still had not returned. Geneviève and Jean had grown visibly more nervous waiting in the midst of the bustling waterfront and enduring the many curious stares. Yet, they couldn't wait in a

less conspicuous place. The captain of the ship had their money in his pocket and wouldn't linger for Geneviève if she weren't there on the spot when he returned. So, she waited for him, huddled in on herself, her body graceless by choice as well as necessity.

Her disguise was a good one. With her eyes averted, she would never be recognized by someone who hadn't before seen her dressed in sailor's garb. Unfortunately, the one man who had, now happened to notice the unlikely pair standing by the water. Jacques Argo was trained to notice suspicious things. It was part of a smuggler's makeup. He stopped short and grabbed his companion's arm. "*Mon Dieu!* It's her!"

Victor was distracted by the sourness in his stomach from the meal of mutton stew he had just consumed. He was startled when his arm was yanked, and yelped.

"Shut up, you fool. Stop and take a look at what I've found."

"What is it you *want*, Jacques," he whined, rubbing his arm. "Leave me alone. I'm ill."

"Look at that boy there," Jacques whispered tensely, indicating Geneviève with a movement of his head. "Haven't you seen him before? *Think*, Victor."

Victor stared dumbly at the youth for a few moments before he recognized Geneviève. He began to smile and nod his head. "Yes. That's the girl who shot you."

"She's the girl we delivered to Bourget without a whit of appreciation, Victor. I've cursed myself long enough for that blunder. I could have had that little treasure with no one the wiser, yet I let her slip away."

Victor listened with growing dread to Jacques' words. He recognized their tone only too well. It meant he would have to exert himself soon to do Jacques' bidding, when all he wished to do was find a quiet, shady spot in which to lie down. Jacques would have his way, as always, but he would need Victor's help. Resigned, he waited quietly for instructions.

Jacques looked around to assess the situation. More than the usual amount of sweat formed in the hollows of his ravaged face. When he dried his brow with a swipe of his sleeve, he was ready. "A foolproof plan, Victor. Listen," he said with a confident smile, and began to detail his scheme to his accomplice.

Both were taken unaware and defenseless. Geneviève was grabbed so forcefully around the stomach from behind that

her breath was momentarily squeezed from her. She couldn't have screamed even if the gnarled hand had not been clamped across her mouth. Jean had been viciously shoved to the ground by Victor's booted foot. He was on his knees and struggling to get up when Victor's knee caught him under the jaw, flipping him over and down again. His head was dizzy with pain. Several men noticed the attack and ran over when they saw the fat, puffing Victor put a knife to Jean's throat.

Jacques had a firm hold on Geneviève, who squirmed uselessly against him. "No cause for alarm, my friends, just a matter of business. This boy jumped ship last night. It seems the slave was trying to help him get away but was too stupid to remain out of sight. These blacks should be kept out of the city. They'll do anything for money."

Blood trickled from the corner of Jean's mouth as he helplessly watched his would-be rescuers laugh and walk away. His pain was now blunted by panic as Victor's knife nicked the skin of his throat. Even if Jacques didn't kill him, no one would believe the truth. Impotent, he watched as Jacques and Victor carried Geneviève to a boat and rowed confidently to their anchored sloop.

When Geneviève regained her breath and saw Victor, she knew immediately whose arms bound her so tightly from behind. His fetid odor would have been proof enough, even had she been blindfolded. Although she was prevented from screaming, she did not cease to struggle. She bit at the man's grimy fingers and kicked backward at his shins. The short grunts she heard told her she was hurting him, but he continued to endure it. If he moved his hand from her mouth to stop her biting or kicking, they would know she was a woman and all would be lost. So he held on. He wanted her that much.

As he was shoving her clumsily into the boat, Jacques tripped and almost lost his grip on her, but with a mighty lunge he yanked her back. He was surprised when she suddenly became docile.

Geneviève lay in the bottom of the boat, gazing up at the brittle blueness of the sky. Only one billowy puff of cloud was visible, swaying in an arch above her. At the periphery of her vision, two faces, grotesquely distorted, appeared and disappeared in rhythmical sequence. She heard the harsh bumping of wood against wood and the delicate sound of lapping

waves. There were also voices, but they were unintelligible and seemed to come from far away. Her head throbbed where she had grazed it against the gunnel of the boat. She wanted to move but was unable to do so; her limbs were too sluggish for her mind to command them.

Suddenly, she was being lifted. Delicate geometric patterns came into view overhead, wavering, ungraspable. Then there was darkness.

Bright spots appeared and she recognized them as the flames of candles, illuminating a familiar musty interior. Someone was standing over her, but the face would not be still. Flickering light played over its swarthy, macabre features. She heard laughter, but it seemed disconnected from the ugly red mouth. Something was tugging at her, at her clothes. Something intangible—not the hands of the spectre before her—was gripping her throat and she found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

Jean watched the boat until it drew up along side the sloop and unloaded its human cargo. His eyes searched desperately up and down the water for an empty boat but saw none. He raged at himself for not being able to swim. He was surrounded by people, yet there was no one upon whom he could call for help. He looked with fury at their unconcerned faces. Only one man among them looked faintly familiar, but he could not place him. He turned away, then it came to him. That man had been at Pacifique on the day that Geneviève had come. He was a friend of Crevaux's. Quickly, Jean ran up to him.

"*Monsieur!*" he cried. "Please, I need your help. They've taken her!"

Judson's eyes widened in excitement when he recognized the man. "Jean! Where is she? Who has taken her?"

"Yes, *monsieur!* Come, I will show you."

They ran to the edge of the water and Jean pointed out the sloop. "Two sailors, whites, attacked us from behind. They took her to that ship. I think she recognized them, *monsieur,*" said the anguished Jean. "I cannot swim!"

Judson was already stripping off his shirt and boots. "How long ago?"

"Only a few moments. Hurry, *monsieur.*"

Although it was extremely rare to see a swimmer in those filthy waters, Judson attracted no more than cursory attention

when he splashed into them. In long, powerful strokes, he soon reached the sloop's taut anchor chain and nimbly climbed it, hand over hand. He swung his legs over the railing and landed on deck in a crouched, defensive stance. Quickly scanning the ship and seeing no one topside, he trod softly to the aft hatchway. He listened for a moment, then descended into its murky interior.

Geneviève, still within her dream, saw another figure burst into the tiny room. It was a man, barechested and gleaming as if he had just stepped from his bath. She recognized his face but could not put a name to it. There was confusion and shouting as the two spectres grappled and then sank from her vision.

Judson watched, impassioned, as the eyes of the man below him bulged from the pressure of blood in his head. When they glazed over and he ceased to struggle, Judson cautiously released the pressure of his powerful grip from the man's neck and let the head loll lifelessly aside. He stood and, with his foot, turned the body over onto its face. Only now was the rage beginning to subside, the rage that had rushed over him when he had entered the cabin and seen what was about to happen. There had been another man, but he must have escaped—luckily, for Judson could easily have killed again.

He turned then to Geneviève, who lay naked on the soiled bunk. Her eyes were closed and he presumed she had fainted. He wanted to keen in anguish at all that had befallen her. He could not bring himself to cover her with the filthy blanket, so he found her clothes and, with much difficulty, began to dress her. When he gently lifted her head to pass her blouse beneath her, his hand came away bloodied. She had been hurt. He cursed himself for thinking she had merely fainted and felt an increased urgency to get her to safety.

Conveniently, the boat still lay in the water, tied to the sloop. He reasoned that the other man must be hiding somewhere on board, but no time could be wasted ferreting out a rat.

Jean was waiting on shore for them with Judson's clothes. He knelt over the unconscious Geneviève, still lying in the boat, as Judson struggled into his boots. "Where can we take her, *monsieur*? Will she be all right?"

"I know a place, Jean. She will be fine, I think, if we can get her there without running into any more of our enemies."

Knowing instinctively that he would not be allowed to carry her, Jean offered a suggestion. "*Monsieur*, if she isn't badly injured, she can be carried over your shoulder like a drunken sailor, and no one will notice."

"Yes. . . ." answered Judson, distracted. Her head wound did not seem to be serious. It was her emotional state that worried him.



## Chapter 19

Geneviève whimpered softly as Judson placed her on the bed. He remained over her, leaning close in case she spoke.

"Leave her with me, *monsieur*. I will call you when she's herself again." When Judson hesitated, Céline took his arm and gently ushered him from the room. "I'll care for her. It's better this way."

Jean and Jean-Baptiste were waiting anxiously when he joined them downstairs. "I think she'll be all right," he said. "She seemed to be waking when I left her with Céline, and it's probably better that I'm not the first person she sees when she wakes." He glanced at Jean, and tried to discern what the man knew of their relationship.

Standing in the drawing room of a strange house was making Jean uncomfortable, but he visibly relaxed at hearing that Geneviève was better. "I can't thank you enough, *monsieur*," he said, bowing slightly to Judson. "If you hadn't come when you did, I would have forever cursed losing her."

"It wasn't your fault, Jean. I'm only glad you spotted me. Here, sit while I fetch us a drink. Jean-Baptiste?"

"No, I will bring the drinks," he said as he went to pour the brandy.

Judson took a glass from Jean-Baptiste and noticed that Jean was still standing by the doorway. Both men realized at once and with great embarrassment Jean's discomfort. It was

considered highly improper for a black man to be entertained in such a fashion.

Jean-Baptiste handed him a brandy, which he took hesitantly, without looking up. "The excitement has done more than make me lose my manners, Jean. It has almost made me lose my honor. You would restore it greatly if you would sit in my home and drink with us," he offered, bowing curtly but graciously.

"Thank you, *monsieur*, but I can only sit for a moment. I must return to the *marrons* and see to my sister."

"I saw her after you left. She was resting well but was worried for you and Geneviève. You must tell her that Geneviève is in good hands," he indicated Judson, "even if she doesn't realize it at the moment."

"Yes, *monsieur*, I understand. If you will excuse me, I'll be going now." He rose from the straight-backed chair and placed his untouched brandy on a nearby table. He slid it behind a vase, hoping they would not notice.

"Have you heard from Seth?" asked Judson when Jean had gone.

"No, but he should be returning soon to check in as we planned."

Judson slowly swirled the amber liquid in his glass, gazing into it intently. "He loves her, too, Jean-Baptiste. He will fight me for her."

Céline entered the room to find both men asleep. She touched Judson lightly on the shoulder. He bolted up, confused with sleep, his heart beating wildly.

"What is it? Is she all right? How long did I sleep?"

She smiled. "One thing at a time, *monsieur*, please."

"What is it?" asked Jean-Baptiste groggily. He was sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

"There is no cause for alarm, my dear friends. I only came to tell you that the girl is recovered. The cut on her head was only a small one."

"How does she seem?" asked Judson tentatively.

"She had been talking with me. She is remarkably recovered for what she's been through."

"Does she remember all that happened?"

"She was lucid on some things but a bit hazy on others."

"Perhaps I could see her now?" inquired Judson uneasily.

"Of course, *monsieur*. She has asked to speak with you."

"She has?"

Judson had no idea what to expect from this unpredictable young woman as he climbed the stairs to her room. He had not anticipated this turn of events, that she would *ask for him*. Perhaps she had finally realized that his concern for her was genuine. He knew that by calling him, she was giving him the chance to explain. If only he could make her understand! But he needed more than that. He wanted her to love him. And she must love him for who he was now, not for who he was ten years ago in Savannah. He paused before her door, breathed deeply and rapped.

"Come in."

She wore a sleek dressing gown and clutched a lacy black shawl. She was sitting unnaturally erect and directed him to a chair that faced her but was some distance away. A healthy color had returned to her face, but there was no sign of welcome. A single thought passed through Judson's mind at that moment. He could never leave her again.

"You have a propensity for rescuing me, Monsieur Talbot," she began, "and I appear to be more in need of it than most. Perpetually, it seems. But I would like to know the reason for this single-minded distraction of yours."

Judson smiled at his former fears for her mental balance. "*Mademoiselle*," he addressed her, maintaining the formality, "I will always go out of my way for that which I value."

"Your attitude vacillates. One moment you value me, and the next you abuse me. It's most confusing."

"I hope the confusion will cease from this very moment. I can assure you that I am of one mind in my feelings for you."

"And what might they be, *monsieur*?"

Judson had been watching her closely but her face betrayed no emotion. Thinking it inappropriate to bare his feelings just yet, he countered with another question. "Why did you run from me that last time, Geneviève? If you hadn't, you would have long been in Savannah by now. Couldn't you believe I was only trying to help you?"

Geneviève searched his eyes for the truth. She wanted to believe him. "I had long ceased to trust anyone on this island," she explained. "Everyone claimed to be acting for my benefit, but each time it was a lie. You rescued me from the Comte d'Villiers, and now you've rescued me again. Yet,

I feel far from safe. I'm sure of no one now, save Jean and Marie."

"You're wrong, Geneviève," he importuned. "I searched for you after you ran, and I lost my ship to the Comte d'Villiers in the process. . . ."

Geneviève interrupted him, faintly smiling for the first time. "Monsieur Crevaux told me about that confrontation."

"Did he also tell you I came to Pacifique and begged to be allowed to see you, to try to explain myself to you and ask for your forgiveness?"

"No," she said, frowning.

"I admitted everything to him. I wasn't myself that night. I was too drunk to comprehend the treachery of Madame Bourget. Don't you understand? She sent you to me under the guise of one of her . . . her women."

But Geneviève's eyes were grimly set. "Even such women as they do not deserve to be taken by force."

"I thought . . . !" Judson threw up his arm as if to orchestrate a heated response, then let it drop in mute frustration. He turned away from her and postured, his hands on his hips. "I thought you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," he said, barely loud enough for her to hear.

Geneviève watched him pace. He didn't seem to be nervous in the face of a lie. Presently, he continued.

"When I realized what I had done—that you were totally innocent—I was consumed with remorse and furious at that woman's deviousness. Whatever my motives, Geneviève," he stressed, turning to look at her, "after that night, I've been concerned only with your welfare. Please believe that you're safe in this house. Jean-Baptiste Lacour, whose home it is and whom you have yet to meet, is the finest of gentlemen and will do all in his power to see you home to Savannah. And," he added, "someone else is here, who also cares for you greatly." He paused. "Seth McKenna."

"Seth is here?" she cried, sitting up. "Where is he?"

"He doesn't know you've been found. He's still searching the city. I expect him back at any moment."

Geneviève could not fight the emotion that was surging up within her. Seth could relieve her of some of her burdens. Tears filled her eyes and a sob escaped from her depths. Judson came to kneel before her. He took her hand and massaged it gently, not knowing what else to do.

"How did he find me?" she managed to ask in a broken voice.

"He found Guy-Pierre's diary of his years in Saint-Domingue and letters from Madame Bourget in which she threatened to kill him."

Geneviève's back straightened in shock and she glared at Judson. "*She* did it?"

"Yes, Geneviève. They were lovers years ago, and when he left her she swore to kill him. Evidently, you were not part of that plan. Since you were mistakenly brought to her, she had to devise a way to rid herself of you or risk being connected with Guy-Pierre's murder. She thought I would take you away as my mistress. That's why she . . ." He enclosed her hand in both of his, fighting his desire to comfort her in his arms.

"But what about Jacques? He was the one who killed my uncle," she protested.

"Her hired assassin, who proved inept."

"Did she also send that man into the mountains to kill me?"

"Yes. Seth had confronted her with his evidence and told her he would destroy it if she took him to you. The man was to be Seth's guide, but his instructions from Madame Bourget were to kill you both. Seth escaped him, but injured his ankle and could do no more. I had also gone into the mountains to search for you and that's where we met."

She looked down at her hand in his. "Do you know what happened to that man, Judson?"

He pulled her to him and let her quietly cry. "And had you not killed him, he would have killed you. You must try to forget these things, Geneviève, along with your hatred of me. All I desire is for you to forgive me."

Geneviève gave herself up to crying, to the flood washing over her. She had resisted it so many times in order to be strong, but strength was now in the arms around her, holding her safe, keeping her from breaking apart, and she was glad of them. Judson Talbot, of whom she had thought so often and toward whom she had directed such hatred, was holding her and she was not afraid. One part of her even desired him and wanted his embrace to be more than tender. Yet she pulled away from him suddenly, in control once again, and looked directly into his eyes. "What is it you want from me?"

Without hesitation, he answered, "I want you to love me as I love you."

The words cut into her, shocked her. She had expected them, even desired them, yet still she was surprised.

Judson could not fathom what Geneviève was feeling. Her expression was more one of curiosity than of love or loathing. He heard a door slam downstairs and rose reluctantly. "That will be Seth."

Mute, she gazed after him, as he left the room and closed the door. Every sense within her told her that she loved him, too. Still, she could neither voice it nor accept it. It was impossible; it was beyond reason. *Seth* was the man she loved. And Seth loved her—enough to come for her and take her away from this hated island.

Judson met Seth hobbling up the stairs with the aid of a cane, wincing each time he put weight on his injured ankle. He beamed when he saw Judson and placed his hand in comradely fashion on Judson's shoulder. "I thank you, my friend, for finding her."

Judson read it in his eyes. He saw the same emotion in Geneviève's eyes when she heard Seth's name. They were obviously very much in love. He forced a smile to his lips. "She's waiting for you, Seth."

Geneviève let her shawl fall when she heard Seth's knock. She was hurrying to open the door when he burst in, unable to wait any longer. Their embrace was long and joyous, and when he pulled back to see her face, both of them saw eyes brimming over with tears.

"I thought this day would never come." He touched the wetness on her cheeks.

"Seth, if only you knew how I prayed to see your face again. Your dear, *sweet* face." She laughed, brushing away his tears. Then she saw the cane. "Your ankle, Seth?"

"It's nothing. I hardly feel it any more."

She hugged him to her again, then led him to a chair. "Tell me about Rachel."

"She was inconsolable at first, of course, losing both you and Guy-Pierre. But she's a strong woman, Geneviève. She will be much better when she sees you again."

Geneviève knew what was coming and she braced herself for it. The next question would be about her—how she had fared in those missing weeks.

Seth could feel the tension in the room mount. He had dreaded this moment. He stood, moved behind the high-backed chair and laid his hand on the design of its embroidered cloth. At that moment, what he wanted most was to lose himself in its intricate weave. But he turned to Geneviève. He must be the one to speak first. He must be the one to take the burden from her.

"I know, Geneviève. I know about what happened between Judson and you. He told me. Now that it's been said, it need never be mentioned again. I'll help you over it as much as I'm able, but it will never, *never* come between us."

She had not looked at him as he spoke. Now, she raised her eyes. "Seth," she began, "the one word you failed to mention in that elegant speech was love."

"But, Geneviève," he gestured with out-thrust palms, "of course, I love you. I thought that was understood! How could you think . . . ?"

"Seth." Her voice was calm and soothing. "Don't misunderstand me. I know you love me deeply, and I love you also. I know you would sacrifice anything for me, as I would you. Yet, in these last few weeks, I've learned much about love. We've been lucky, Seth. We've been flooded with love in our lives. So much so that we've had to think little about it. We *do* love each other, in a manner that will endure. Yet, it doesn't *consume* us." She stopped then, her forehead creased in thought. This was not what she had planned to say. Her voice was firm when she continued. "I am no longer desirable for marriage. I've made a firm decision not to ruin your life or mine by going ahead with our innocent plans."

"Geneviève," he pleaded, "must you refuse to believe that this can be forgotten?"

She walked over and laid her small hand on his. "That isn't the point, Seth. Too much has happened to go back to where we once were. Even so, I think we knew before that our marriage was only what was expected of us. There was always something—" passion, she thought but could not bring herself to utter it, "—lacking," she finished.

Seth knew the truth of her words. Yet, because of the circumstances, he judged that she needed his support now more than ever and he refused to acquiesce. He would deny it to the end—thinking of Anne Pierce, he would still deny it. The truth was too harsh for this moment. "Geneviève, you're blaming yourself for what others have done to you. Stop

thinking of that and try to remember what we had. Try to remember the goodness of it, the rightness."

"Seth, I know my own mind now, and what I must do. I will never marry. No one on earth will convince me otherwise."

"Even Judson?" She had yet to mention him and Seth yearned to know her feelings for him.

Geneviève did not avert her eyes from Seth's, but it was a long moment before she replied. "I have hated him, Seth. It was easy to hate him. But I've had other feelings, and as much as I've tried to deny them, they keep returning to haunt me. At times, I no longer know myself."

"And only a moment ago, you were the most confident woman in the world."

She smiled feebly and nodded at his perceptiveness.

"Tell me," he prodded, "can you still love him after all these years and after what he's done to you?"

"After all these years?" she repeated, puzzled.

Seth realized then that Judson had not told her. Why not, he wondered. "You don't know, do you? You don't know who Judson is."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the English boy we met in Savannah when we were children? The boy we so happily delivered to the French? The boy who inspired your imagination to such a degree that I haven't ceased to be jealous of him for these ten long years?" He smiled.

Geneviève thought it could only be a cruel joke. But she wanted desperately to believe Seth. He had said something that would provide the missing, crucial piece to the puzzle of her turbulent feelings; the piece that would relieve her of all reservations. Her love for Judson would be inevitable. *She did love him*, and this would permit her to admit it to herself!

Her eyes were animated when she asked to hear it once again. "Seth, is it possible? Is it really true?"

He read her thoughts and was both relieved and saddened. He was happy for her, yet he felt a nagging sense of loss. "It is the truth, Geneviève. As true as what you said of our relationship." He looked into her eyes and smiled. "And I'm glad for you."

When Judson joined Jean-Baptiste downstairs, he was surprised to find him alone. "Where is Céline?" he inquired.

"I've sent her home. Two beautiful women in one house is



one too many." He laughed, then added, "I think Céline has grown too fond of you, Judson. She is already jealous of Geneviève. And though I've never questioned her loyalty to me, her attitude might change if she thinks my only intention now is to spirit you and Geneviève away from here, and from her."

"I see," mumbled Judson, embarrassed.

"So, it's time now we discussed the important matter of your departure from this paradise of an island."

"I have no suggestions, Jean-Baptiste. I have never felt more powerless in my entire life." He smiled and added, "I trust you to the utmost. What have you in mind?"

Jean-Baptiste settled back into a corner of the sofa. "It would be comparatively easy to get the three of you on a ship and have you sail silently away into the night. Yet, it galls me to think of you losing your own ship and your future livelihood to someone as despicable as the Comte d'Villiers. I would prefer to see you leave this island with your pride intact and in the same ship in which you came."

Judson leaned forward in anticipation. "Do you think it possible? I'm a healthy man, Jean-Baptiste, I'll eventually have another ship. I wouldn't want to put Geneviève's safety in jeopardy for my own pride."

"But, wouldn't you find it more pleasing to do it my way?" Jean-Baptiste teased.

Judson's eyes flashed at the suggestion of adventure. "Tell me more."

"I have several favors owed me from just the sort of men who can do the thing I have in mind," he explained, pouring more brandy. "The government's soldiers have almost forgotten you, if the comte has not, and they aren't keeping as close a watch on your ship now. The guards aboard her sleep much of the time, and they would probably be eager to join your crew and seek their fortunes in America."

"Are you sure there won't be any danger to you or Geneviève?"

"Quite certain."

"Then do it."

"I'll go now to make the arrangements. You, of course, must remain here in hiding. I'll take Seth with me." He winked and added, "I trust you'll be able to care for Geneviève alone?"

Judson rose stiffly. "I plan to take a long, leisurely bath, my

friend. I think Geneviève has other commitments," he said resignedly.

Geneviève had prepared herself. When she heard the closing of the downstairs door, she knew that only she and Judson remained in the house. Her heart was beating unnaturally as she stepped into the hallway. She had no idea where he might be in this unfamiliar house, but she would find him. She wouldn't wait any longer to tell him what was in her heart.

She folded her arms defensively. She felt strange venturing out of her room clad in such scanty attire. The peach silk dressing gown was designed with such a low bodice that the tops of her breasts were revealed. It was held in place solely by a sash at the waist.

She paused to listen at each door along the hall. Behind the third, there was movement. She raised her hand to knock, but the door opened slightly to emit a thin sliver of light.

"Yes?" Judson's voice boomed out. "Who is it?"

Taking a deep breath, Geneviève thrust the door wide. Evidently, he was readying himself to bathe. He wore only his cream, skintight breeches, and held a large linen towel in his hand. In the center of the room, glowing golden in the warm candlelight, stood a huge copper tub filled with water.

When she saw him dressed as he had been on that first night, her resolve evaporated. It wasn't that she feared him. She desired him, but something made her stop. She had never gone freely to a man. Suddenly, she felt embarrassed that she had walked in on him so brazenly.

"I . . . forgive me. I was just . . ."

Judson threw the towel on the table and quickly walked toward her. "What is it, Geneviève? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," she answered, blushing helplessly. The room was warm, but he stood so near her that she could feel the heat radiating from his chest. She found herself looking at his body for the first time. His torso was darkly tanned and intricately muscled. The dark mat of hair on his chest narrowed into a band that disappeared at the waist of his breeches. The breeches themselves did little to hide the contours of his lower body: narrow, compact hips and graceful, muscular thighs.

He watched her eyes on him and felt his heart pound. He knew now why she had come. He looked at her and found it

difficult to believe he might have her. She was more beautiful tonight than he had ever seen her. She had grown tan and healthy from outdoor life in the mountains, and her dark hair shone auburn from the sun. She wore it loose and it cascaded nearly to her waist. Almost without thinking, he leaned his face to hers in an awkward kiss. She opened her mouth to his and nestled her body against him. Suddenly, he pulled away.

"No," he murmured, smiling. "This time, there will be no hurry. I want to remember this for the rest of my life." Gently, he brushed her cheeks with his thumbs, then slid his fingers through her hair and down her neck.

"Geneviève," he whispered hoarsely, "I want you more than I've ever wanted a woman. Look at me, I'm trembling with desire for you. This time, it will be different. But I need to know you want me."

Judson raised the backs of his hands to her breasts and drew his knuckles lightly back and forth across the points of her nipples showing through the thin silk. She felt his touch shoot through her like liquid fire.

"Don't you see?" she breathed. "That's why I've come."

"Then tell me."

"I want you," she said with difficulty, not because the desire was lacking but because the words were new to her.

"Tell me with your hands, Geneviève. With your body."

She felt herself blush deeply and turned away so that he could not see. Stepping behind her, he enclosed her in his arms. She felt his hardness pressing into her back.

"Judson, I can't do what you ask."

"Don't be afraid, Geneviève," he coaxed as his hands went to the sash of her dressing gown. When he pulled at it, the weight of the material caused the front of the gown to part and her nakedness was revealed.

The spread fingers of his hands touched her thighs, slid slowly upward to her belly and came to rest under her firm breasts, cupping them. His thumbs played over her nipples. She thought she would faint from wanting him. She reached out to him for support. After a moment, she hesitantly began to move her hands over the hard muscles of his stomach.

"Yes," he whispered, encouraging her.

Her hands moved upward to his chest, then in a slow caress down his sides until they touched the soft material of his breeches. A slight diversion brought her fingers to the

buttons. Judson helped her and in a moment he stood naked. His hands went to the shoulders of her gown and slid it from her. Only then did he take her hand and lead her to the bed.

They faced each other on their sides, with their bodies gently touching. Judson ran his fingers down her back to her taut buttocks. "I love you, Geneviève." Earnest blue eyes penetrated her.

She rolled to him, nestling her face in the crook of his neck. She felt him guide himself to her, yet still he did not take her. She moved against him and heard him moan. He gripped her hair. When he lay on his back, she moved with him, found him again and settled onto him. She had never felt such ecstasy. He began to move under her and she followed him. Their rhythm ascended at a frenzied pace until Geneviève heard herself cry out in a flood of release without shame.

When she opened her eyes, he was smiling.

"Are you ready for your bath, my lady?"

"My bath?"

"Yes. Your servant is ready to bathe you." With that, Judson rose from the bed and gathered her in his arms. He placed her gently into the cool water of the deep copper tub. As he made preparations to bathe her, she could not keep her eyes from his lithe body.

When he had lowered himself into the water next to her, she lay back and let her hair cascade over the side of the tub. She closed her eyes while his hands found every part of her. He was gentle, but instead of soothing her he was slowly renewing her desire. Her body was tingling as she knelt to bathe him. She found his hard, silky manhood and her body ached for him.

They emerged from the tub and, still dripping with water, Judson lifted her into his arms. He carried her onto the dark balcony and into the full strength of the ocean breeze. The tangy smell of the sea laced with the perfume of thousands of flowers surrounded them. It carried with it the human and animal sounds of the humming, vibrant city. Distant drumbeats from the mountains answered the agitated tattoo of the palm fronds at their feet. Stars dotted the crisp, clear sky, their images mirrored in the tiny lights of the city and bay below. The moon's luminescence sparkled on the sea in a path that broadened as it came toward them.

Judson's lips were tender but urgent as they grazed her

ears, her neck, and she whispered, "I love you, Judson." He looked into her eyes and she said it aloud. "I love you." She was never more sure of anything than she was of this.

He placed her on her feet and pressed her up against the wall with his body. She felt the fiery heat of his mouth on her skin. When he took her nipple gently between his teeth, she felt desire explode in her loins. She had to brace herself against the wall as his mouth, seemingly everywhere at once, caressed her. When he knelt before her, she buried her fingers in his thick, curly hair and moaned unashamedly at the pleasure he was giving her.

When she thought she could stand no more, he lifted her and carried her to the bed. She lay back to receive him. He covered her body lightly with his, supporting himself so that they touched along their length but he was weightless above her. The feel of his skin seared her, the insistence of his lips drove her to new heights of pleasure. The moist garden of her love had turned to pain in her yearning to have him there. She had never known such desire; he could not touch her enough. She reached for him and felt the throbbing of his own need for her. He lifted his body and hovered, inches away, and she began to feel delicious pressure, voluptuous searching probes. With deliberate, thrilling slowness, he parted her and filled her. Their movements merged into a single rocking, a single urgent rhythm that could not wait.

Her hand played in his hair and traced the outlines of his face. When she ceased, he opened one eye. "Did I say something to make you stop, *mademoiselle*?"

She pinched his arm. "You say nothing at all. You have forgotten me entirely."

"There you are wrong." He smiled and moved her hand to his tumescence. When he saw her blush, he rose onto one elbow and touched his fingers lightly to her burning cheek. "I was only basking in your affection, Geneviève. I've yearned for it so often and so long that I couldn't bring myself to move for fear you'd stop touching me."

"I do love you, Judson Talbot, and I don't know why. All of this is so strange." She indicated the room with a wave of her hand. "I find myself in this strange house, in this bed, uttering words I hardly believe are coming from me. I resisted you for so long . . . and for good reason," she added, narrowing her eyes. "But tonight, when you told me you

loved me, I knew that I loved you, too. I said nothing because it still seemed wrong. There was Seth . . . and other things. Then, when Seth told me it was you in Savannah those many years ago, I knew the rightness of it. Perhaps it was meant to be, and we could not stop it if we tried."

A loud rapping at the downstairs entrance interrupted them. Geneviève saw the concern on Judson's face. "We shouldn't answer it, Judson. No one must know we're here."

The rapping became insistent, and Judson knew he must do something. He feared that it might be Céline returning. As he struggled into his clothes, he told Geneviève not to worry. "Dress, Geneviève, but remain in this room. If there is trouble, hide in here." He pushed at one of the wall panels and it sprung open to reveal a tiny alcove containing a single chair. "Open it for no one except Jean-Baptiste or me. Do you understand?"

Margrit had decided long ago that she must do something to stop the Comte d'Villiers' insidious and relentless attacks on her mistress. Madame Bourget was becoming unstrung and Margrit feared that the comte's harassment would be her mistress's undoing. For Margrit, who had devoted so much of her life to this woman, there would be nothing left.

If her mistress, with all her powerful connections, could not stop the comte, what, she wondered, could a mere *cocotte* do? The more she schemed and thought about it, the more impossible it seemed—until the solution came to her, luminous in its perfection. Now that Sebastien had taken care of the girl, Geneviève, Judson Talbot was the only remaining thorn in Madame Bourget's relationship with the comte. And she, Margrit, knew Talbot's whereabouts. Madame Bourget would never hand Talbot over to the comte because of her strange attraction to him. If the comte could extract his revenge from Talbot, then perhaps he would leave Simone alone, and Margrit's life would return to normal.

Judson opened the door to Margrit's pained and nervous voice. "You must come with me, *monsieur*, or she will be killed."

"Who will be killed? What are you talking of, woman?"

"Madame Bourget," she wailed.

"Calm yourself, Margrit, you're making no sense. Who is killing her?"

"You were seen leaving the salon, *monsieur*. The Comte

d'Villiers was informed and is this minute subjecting her to the most intense torture. He said he will kill her if she doesn't bring you to him, and she refuses to do so, monsieur."

"You've come to the wrong person. Call the gendarmerie if she needs help. What could I possibly do?"

"The comte *controls* the gendarmerie, *monsieur*. Don't you understand?"

Though Judson continued to rant at Margrit, he did understand and he knew he would go. There was nothing else he could do and no one else to send. But he would remain cautious. Simone Bourget, he had begun to realize, was capable of anything.

## Chapter 20

Geneviève found she couldn't simply sit about in her dressing gown and wait. Judson had instructed her not to leave this room so as to be close to the secret panel at the first sign of trouble. But then he had left the house, refusing to tell her where or why he was going. He had said not to worry, that he would return soon. He hadn't even told her who had come for him, but she had recognized the excited voice of Madame Bourget's *cocotte*, Margrit. Something was wrong, very wrong, for Judson to take a chance at being caught now.

She hurried back to her bedchamber and threw open the doors of an armoire in which she remembered seeing a small collection of gowns. Quickly, she selected the plainest, most unassuming one, and held it up against herself. It wouldn't be a perfect fit, but it would do. The only radical alteration needed would be to the hem, so she wouldn't trip over skirts if she had to run. Her heart beat wildly as she felt the old fear returning. How much more of her life would have to be spent in this ridiculous fashion, she wondered, and suddenly laughed aloud in an outburst of dark humor.

Finding nothing in the room with which to cut the material, she surprised herself by quickly and efficiently accomplishing her purpose with her teeth and hands. Without compunction, she simply ripped the hem from the expensive garment and lost no time getting into it.

When she returned to the room where she and Judson had



so recently made love, she felt even more lonely and afraid. She couldn't relax. There was nothing in the room that didn't recall his presence and renew her concern for him. She tried to reassure herself that nothing could happen to them now to take away their happiness. Not when it was so close to fulfillment. What had happened between them in this room had been the most real experience of her life. Yet, here she was alone with it. She felt anger rise beneath her frustration and struggled against it. His leaving had caused an unreasonable feeling of helplessness in her. Of course, she trusted him and she knew she wasn't helpless. Determinedly, she slapped at the bedcovers in the guise of smoothing them, then sat on the edge of the bed to wait. Her hands, she noticed, were trembling.

Precisely ten minutes passed in silence before she heard someone enter the house. She crept to the door to listen and recognized the agitated voices of Seth and Jean-Baptiste. She ran into the hallway and met Seth bounding up the steps toward her. When she saw the expression on his face, her chest constricted. Something terrible had happened.

"Geneviève!" he called out breathlessly. "I was afraid he had you, too!"

"Where is Judson, Seth?" Her fingers were at her throat, feeling for the diamond pendant that had long since disappeared.

Jean-Baptiste had run up behind Seth to join them. "Judson has been arrested, Geneviève. We just passed him in the street, under guard and on his way to jail. He motioned for us not to recognize him, so we ran here, thinking perhaps the comte had found you. What happened?"

Geneviève's knees protested and she had to sit down on the steps before she could continue. "Margrit came for him, Jean-Baptiste, Madame Bourget's *cocotte*. They argued, but he finally agreed to leave with her. He wouldn't tell me why or where, only that he would return soon."

"*Bourget*," He let the name hiss from his mouth. "I should have known."

Seth was incredulous. "Why would he go to her now, after all that has happened?"

"He wouldn't," said Jean-Baptiste with conviction, "unless he was tricked."

Geneviève listened as the men talked, but she said nothing. Seth saw her trembling hands and reached out to comfort her.

"Don't be frightened, Geneviève. We'll find a solution to this." But Seth had misunderstood. It wasn't terror that now caused the trembling, it was clear, sharp anger.

Seth turned back to Jean-Baptiste. "How will they deal with him?" he asked hesitantly.

His answer was derisive. "With their form of justice. There will be a mock trial and mandatory and immediate death sentence. We have no legal recourse. The comte is in charge here, and I'm no match for his powers."

"How much time do we have?"

"A day, perhaps two," he answered, looking at Geneviève. "Come, *mademoiselle*. You look pale. A brandy is called for."

Geneviève took his outstretched hand and stood. "Thank you, Jean-Baptiste, but I'm overcome with fatigue, and the pain has returned to my head. I think I'll retire for the night. I trust you and Seth to determine a course of action and instruct me in the morning. Goodnight," she said and turned toward her bedchamber.

Seth stared after her, unbelieving. "Something is wrong. I've never seen Geneviève behave in such a manner before."

"It's a perfectly natural response, Seth. She has been forced to respond to so many upheavals in these last few weeks that she hasn't the strength for this last trial. We must let her sleep. It's the best thing for her now."

"We have no real choice here, Seth," continued Jean-Baptiste in the drawing room. "If Judson is to stay alive, we must get him out of jail."

"There's no easy solution, is there?"

"No. We'll be risking our lives."

"Then, we must see Geneviève safely away from here before we do anything."

"Of course. We'll hire a ship in the morning. Money is no problem."

"Thank you, Jean-Baptiste. I will repay you."

"Do not insult me, Seth. I choose how I spend my money." He bowed curtly and smiled. "And after she is safely away, we will arrange a plan of escape. It will have to be prepared by tomorrow night, or we'll find a corpse instead of a prisoner. So, since we'll have Judson by then, our arrangements to meet his ship in the cove will stand. Tomorrow will be a long day, Seth. We must rest. Come, I'll show you to your room."

"What are our chances, Jean-Baptiste? The truth, please."

"Normally, nil," he said. Then he winked. "Our only advantage is that I've done this sort of thing before."

The streets of Port-au-Prince were unusually quiet as they neared the military prison compound. Judson, his hands bound securely behind him, was forced to keep pace with the soldiers. They surrounded him, and the sound of their heavy boots tramping in time was thunderous in the otherwise still night air. The soldiers were allowed this precision because their prisoner was giving them no trouble.

Judson was behaving because he knew the futility of trying to break away alone without a horse. His one chance at escape had come and gone, and he had chosen not to take it. Just a few moments ago, their little party had passed within a few feet of the unbelieving stares of Seth and Jean-Baptiste, who were returning home with no knowledge of what had happened. With their help and the advantage of surprise, he could have escaped then. But Geneviève was alone in the house, and for all he knew, the Comte d'Villiers was with her now. He couldn't risk failure. Seth and Jean-Baptiste must see to her first. He caught their eyes and indicated with a barely perceptible turn of his head that they were not to attempt a rescue. The two were puzzled, but they obeyed his wishes. It was a moment before they realized that Geneviève might be in trouble.

His captors halted him at the iron gates of the compound while they proceeded to gain entrance. In those few moments, Judson noted the layout of the prison. Its design was simple and inefficient. It consisted of a courtyard surrounded by high walls of ballast stone on the north and south. The east and west walls were merely the backs of the two buildings that faced each other across the courtyard. One of the buildings was the prison itself and the other served as a barracks for the guards. They had come along the rear of the prison building, which had its own outside entrance—or exit, Judson noted. That was its weakness.

They had taken his pistol when he had been captured, but when he reached the guardroom, they searched him again, thoroughly. Then, with a single lantern, they led him to the far end of a pitch-black, narrow corridor to a tiny cell. There was hardly room to lie full length on the floor. From the meager light of the lantern, Judson could see no windows.

The cell was bare except for a wooden bucket. When the guards left, he was plunged into darkness.

After the heavy slam of the corridor door, Judson listened for the sound of other prisoners. There was silence. He called out but was answered only by the scurry of rats nearby. In the inky blackness, he couldn't tell how close they were. He put out his hand to feel the wall of the cell. It was slimy to his touch, covered with a film of mold. He moved his feet in arcs until one of them found the wooden bucket. He pushed the filthy thing with his boot to the far corner of the cell. Then, lowering himself slowly to a sitting position on the floor, he gingerly leaned back against the wall. There was nothing to do but think. Sleep was impossible. The dampness in the cell was beginning to seep through his clothes.

He had no idea why Madame Bourget had done this. She was under the illusion that Geneviève was dead, killed by Sebastien, so why would she feel disposed to avenge herself upon him now? But it must have been she because it was Margrit who had lured him to his capture . . . unless Margrit had been working for the comte. Pray God that man would not find Geneviève! Still vivid was his image of the Comte d'Villiers' lurid features as he stepped out of the shadows to confront him. He had said nothing, but neither had he taken any pains to conceal his pleasure as the soldiers took Judson in hand.

The real question was how either of them had known Geneviève was with him. They couldn't have, unless someone had seen her, and that he doubted. It was unlikely that Céline had given her away. The possibility was great that neither the comte nor Madame Bourget knew Geneviève's whereabouts. Seth and Jean-Baptiste would have returned to the house. He hoped they were with her now. His mind only slightly at ease, Judson passed the night awaiting the comte's certain visit on the morrow.

Eventually, he became aware of the outlines of his cell and realized that dawn was seeping in from some distant opening. It wouldn't be long now, he thought.

At the house of Jean-Baptiste, the dawn brought a rude surprise. Seth's troubled dream fought to keep him as Jean-Baptiste shook him roughly awake.

"Wake up, Seth. She's gone!"

"What?"

"Geneviève has disappeared!"

The two men stared at each other. In both their minds was the same stark realization. There was only one place Geneviève could have gone.

Irritably, Simone shrugged the cream lace of the gown from her shoulders, ignoring the expensive fabric as it fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.

"This one will not do, Margrit. Can't you see that it does nothing for my complexion? I don't wish to appear sallow and drawn. Select another."

Simone threw herself dejectedly onto the green toile chaise beside her bed, frowning at the *cocotte*. She glanced from Margrit to the decanter of brandy on the side table. The soothing drink had become more a necessity than a pleasure in the last few months, and she felt a longing for the warmth and relaxation the alcohol could provide. But her nerves could not withstand Margrit's scolding. The *cocotte* had been watching her mistress' liquor consumption carefully and discouraged Simone's drinking except during parties, when her abstinence would be remarked by her guests.

"*Madame*, will you consider this one?" Margrit asked, holding up a magnificent gown with a black silk bodice and frothy skirt in white *moiré*.

Simone took the gown to appraise her image in the mirror. Holding the fabric against her waist, she suddenly turned to the *cocotte*. "Margrit, this gown . . . does it make me look older?" She frowned.

"No, *madame*. You are overwrought. The gown is most becoming."

Simone sighed, relaxing a bit. "This situation with Sebastien has frazzled my nerves. The man is capable, I'm sure, but what had detained him? Surely, he knows my concern. It's most cruel that he should keep me waiting in this manner."

"This is so. But, the mountains hold many beautiful women. Perhaps he indulges in an *amour, madame*. He is known for his lack of control, that one."

"Yes, Margrit, I know. I must be patient. Sebastien will go his *own* way. This is one of the dangers in dealing with him. He takes orders from no one."

At the mention of *amour*, Simone's thoughts had involuntarily turned to Judson Talbot. The man frequently entered

her mind, though she knew to entertain fantasies of the young captain was unwise. Still, she couldn't help thinking of him. Her vanity was stung by his refusal of her very obvious overtures, and her body had once again begun to long for the touch of a man.

"Margrit, has any news come to you in the market place concerning Monsieur Talbot?" Simone asked, attempting to sound casual.

"No, *madame*, I've heard nothing. The market is rife with talk of Monsieur Talbot, but it is idle chatter. Nothing is known of him." Margrit looked sharply at Simone, and the disapproving glance was not lost on her mistress.

"You don't approve of my concern, I see," Simone said.

"Your concern, *madame*, could place you in the greatest danger. The matter is best left to others, I think. Hasn't your acquaintance with Monsieur Talbot brought only problems to you?"

Margrit carefully rearranged the scent bottles on Simone's dressing table to keep her expression from her mistress. The *cocotte* was sure that she had handled correctly the matter of Judson Talbot. She understood Simone's strong attraction to the captain. What woman wouldn't respond to such a man? But the consequences were not worth the game, Margrit felt sure. She had known her mistress too long to ignore the danger of her nervous state and her daily need for more brandy. Simone was on the verge of collapse. Yes, Margrit was sure she had acted wisely. The Comte d'Villiers would take his revenge on Talbot, leaving Simone free of his harassment. As for Talbot, he would soon be forgotten.

The faint ringing of a bell broke Margrit's reverie.

"Madame," she called, "your guests have arrived."

"Yes, yes," Simone replied. "Attend to them. I will be down shortly."

Simone sighed with relief. At last she would be free to drink the calming brandy without Margrit's eye upon her. She coiled her dark hair into place and adjusted her bodice. Fastening a pendant of pearls and black enamel-work around her throat, she regarded her reflection with satisfaction. She was a lovely woman still. Smiling with renewed confidence, Simone descended the stairs to greet her guests.

Dear Margrit, Simone thought, as she entered the large salon. She could see that the *cocotte* had already served brandy and refreshments. Hélène had been called to attend

the two gentlemen, who appeared to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Wearing a brilliant smile, she entered the room and offered her hand to each of the *grands blancs*. They were clearly dazzled by her, Simone noted with amusement. Her clients grew younger each year, she thought ruefully. No matter—fortunately, they were as rich as their fathers, and she had no serious designs upon them.

Simone had grown so practiced in her art that she could respond graciously to the inconsequential chatter of her clients while thinking her own thoughts. So it went with these gentlemen, until the older of the two happened to mention a name of importance to his hostess.

"Pardon, *monsieur*, would you kindly repeat what you were saying," Simone asked, suddenly alert.

"Of course, Madame Bourget," the man replied, smiling. "I have it from a highly regarded source that this Judson Talbot has been captured. The Comte d'Villiers is quite pleased, I hear."

"You're certain of this *monsieur*?" Simone asked.

"But yes, *madame*. The entire city will know shortly. Talbot was apprehended on the street, I understand, and has been taken to jail. If the Comte d'Villiers has his way—and has anyone ever denied him that—this sea captain will not long have need of a cell."

The man's voice droned on, but Simone no longer heard him. For a short time, she continued to sit with her guests, so as not to arouse their curiosity. But as quickly as she could manage, she excused herself to seek Margrit.

Simone found her resting in her sitting room. The *cocotte* was alarmed by the glitter of excitement in Simone's eyes.

"Margrit, Judson Talbot has been arrested. I have just heard this from one of my guests. You had heard nothing?"

"No, *madame*. Had I heard, I would have told you," Margrit answered.

"I cannot question these *grands blancs* too closely, Margrit. They might become suspicious if I display more than polite curiosity. But I must have more details."

"*Madame*, I beg you, don't involve yourself in this matter," Margrit pleaded. "Have you no regard for your safety? Besides, you can do nothing if Talbot is arrested."

"Perhaps not, but . . . I have it, Margrit! Bertrand

Calmon. He's the one I should speak to. The fat fool. He's been in love with me for years."

Bertrand Calmon was an official of the government, who had indeed loved Simone Bourget from afar, from the night he had first seen her on the arm of Guy-Pierre d'Binet. When Simone had established her salon, he had entertained hopes of winning her affections but had been curtly rebuffed. Simone had realized that Bertrand would quickly become a liability to her growing prestige had she allowed him to frequent her salon. The *grands blancs* of Saint-Domingue viewed with suspicion all government officials and refused to socialize with them. These officials formed a separate and distinct class in this city of many cliques. Though she had spurned him, the stout little man had never failed through the years to remind her of his continuing affections.

"Have you paper, Margrit? I'll write to him asking that he visit. He will surely have the information I need."

"*Madame*, please, no," Margrit beseeched her mistress.

Simone's fevered expression calmed. "Margrit, I know that you intend the best for me, but you must do this. Have the maid deliver my note to Bertrand, then see that the guests have left before he arrives. Tell them I'm unwell. They cannot be here when Monsieur Calmon comes."

"Very well, *madame*," Margrit replied, defeated.

"I must go and prepare myself, Margrit. It's important that I approach Bertrand carefully if I'm to use him to full advantage. Go, now."

Margrit's feet moved as if weighted with lead. She had done all within her power to prevent the disaster Simone courted. Margrit couldn't explain the certainty she felt that this latest obsession of her mistress's would lead to ruin for both of them. Simone was headstrong, Margrit thought, but only twice had she ever been careless and foolhardy. Both times Margrit had attempted to curb her and failed. As the *cocotte* made excuses to Simone's guests and ushered them to the door, she felt her fate had already been sealed.

Simone placed her hand delicately on Bertrand Calmon's knee. Leaning toward him, she allowed his gaze to linger on the generous cleavage exposed by the low-cut bodice of her black dress.

"*Mon cher*," she said softly, "it has been much too long since you've visited me. You look well."



Color rose to Bertrand Calmon's plump cheeks, and he fidgeted with barely suppressed excitement. "*Madame*, there are so many others in your life, I'm surprised to find that you remember me."

"Ah, but *monsieur*, the others of whom you speak I see only in my salon. I've recently decided that my livelihood will no longer be allowed to interfere with my pleasure. And so, I've entreated you to visit me." Simone laughed girlishly and leaned back to gauge the effect of her words on Monsieur Calmon.

Tentatively, the little man took Simone's hand in his. He didn't dare believe that Simone desired him, but he was most willing to be convinced.

"Bertrand," she said coaxingly, "I have recently received a shipment of very fine claret from France. Shall I have a bottle brought for us?"

Delighted with Simone's offer, the man could hardly refuse, though he knew he held drink poorly and was prone to a wagging tongue when in his cups.

After several snifters of the claret and a great deal of flattery from Simone, Monsieur Calmon would have gladly granted anything to his charming hostess.

"*Monsieur*, do tell me about your work. I have little occasion to hear of the intricacies of our government. I would be most fascinated to hear about this. You've been appointed to a very influential position, I understand. No, no, don't deny it. I have my sources, *monsieur*. You have been remarkably successful."

Bertrand squirmed with pleasure.

"It's true that I've been fortunate, *madame*. But government is too dull for your ears, *chérie*."

Simone feared that she hadn't used sufficient subtlety with Calmon. However, a glance at his face allayed her concern.

"But, *monsieur*, on the contrary. I've heard snippets of gossip concerning a very exciting occurrence that will no doubt fall within your sphere of influence. A fugitive has been caught, a sea captain, I believe. You can't deny that this is exciting."

"Ah, yes, I know that ladies' imaginations are stimulated by such things." He smiled indulgently.

"*Monsieur*, do tell me," Simone clapped her hands in feigned delight. "I've been so dull recently," she pouted. "Do you suppose this gentleman's friends will secure his release?"

"Far from it," Calmon blustered. "Release would be out of the question, unless the Comte d'Villiers refuses to press charges against this man Talbot. But that's unthinkable. You see, it's an affair of passion, no simple crime."

"The Comte d'Villiers will not relent?" Simone asked.

"No, no." Bertrand shook his head vigorously.

"The comte has also discovered that Captain Talbot is a member of the *Amis des Noirs*. The *grands blancs* will support d'Villiers in his persecution of Talbot for that sin alone. Yes, *chérie*, if it is excitement you crave, this affair should provide it." He smiled, patting Simone's hand.

Simone had already dismissed Bertrand from her mind. She lost no time in hurrying him to the door. A heavy fog had rolled in from the sea, and the squat little man disappeared into its gloom, looking confused and tipsy. Simone closed the door firmly behind his retreating back.

So, d'Villiers would be satisfied with nothing less than a mock trial and Judson Talbot's certain death. This was as she had imagined. There would be no hope of freeing Judson through the usual methods of bribery and the collection of old debts. The comte was too powerful for any official to risk his displeasure over this affair. No matter, Simone mused. There were other ways to achieve her objective. The comte would be thwarted, this she had promised herself.

## Chapter 21

Geneviève led the bay gelding quietly through the alley behind Jean-Baptiste's house. On reaching the street, she guided the horse into the sheltering darkness of a tall bougainvillea hedge. Her decision to offer herself to d'Villiers remained firm. When she heard of Judson's capture, her mind had frantically sought a means to avoid so drastic a solution. But knowing the vindictiveness of the comte, she had again come to the conclusion that only she could sway d'Villiers.

She realized that Seth and Jean-Baptiste would be willing to aid Judson in any way, but could see little that they could accomplish. Jean-Baptiste was powerless against d'Villiers. Intervention on his part in the *grand blanc's* plans would not only be frustrated, but could perhaps place him in grave danger. Seth could be of even less help. He was a stranger to the island, just as she, and he was injured as well.

Geneviève clasped Céline's dark cape around her and lifted her small chin. Appropriately, she reasoned, the matter had fallen to her. Had it not been for her, Judson might never have met d'Villiers. None of this misfortune would have befallen him. The problem did not really concern Jean-Baptiste or Seth. Only d'Villiers, Judson and she were involved. The others should not be forced to endanger themselves.

Geneviève mounted and calmed the nervous horse. She

adjusted her cape, and touched the bun at the nape of her neck to make sure it was tightly in place. With her hair knotted severely and the shapeless cloak wrapped about her, she expected to be seen as another anonymous shadow moving through the streets of Port-au-Prince.

After nightfall, the city completely gave itself over to the feverish pursuit of pleasure. An unescorted woman would be seen as a resident of one of the numerous brothels, or at least as a pleasure-seeker. The men she must pass in the streets would have spent the earlier part of the evening drinking rum and cognac in the taverns. By now, they would care little that Geneviève was a lady if they should recognize her beauty. She was well aware of the danger in her plans. Her hands were cold with anxiety.

Her own desire was to reach d'Villiers as quickly as possible. She knew he would be at his house in the mountains above the city. Odile had said that the comte sought the cooler atmosphere during the warmer months. Geneviève clearly remembered that, during her journey to the Cul-de-Sac, Odile had pointed out the road that led to d'Villiers' summer lodge. If she could ride unnoticed through the streets of the city and find this road, she could easily manage the remainder of the journey. She wouldn't dwell now on the coming meeting with d'Villiers.

She rode cautiously, keeping to the shadows and avoiding the patches of light from the houses. Ahead, she saw a group of drunken men laughing and shouting in front of a popular tavern. She turned her mount, urging him into a narrow street to avoid passing the revelers. As the horse picked his way down the litter-strewn alley, the stink of rotting vegetables and damp brick assailed Geneviève's nostrils. From the windows above her, voices threatened and quarreled. A woman's high-pitched, monotonous singing shrilled from the ground floor of a brothel. Geneviève could have stretched out her hand and touched the woman's dark, pinched face.

Nudging the big horse with her heels, she increased his pace until they emerged from the fetid atmosphere of the alley. With relief she saw that she was approaching a sparsely populated area on the edge of town. This section was darker. Palm trees and tangled shrubbery replaced the tightly crowded houses they had just left. The creak of saddle leather and the click of the bit against her horse's teeth as he toyed

with the metal were comforting sounds. She gave the gelding his head and he broke into a rolling canter along the deserted road.

Geneviève estimated that she had traveled about a half-mile and should be near the road she sought. She peered through the darkness but could see nothing. Behind her a carriage was approaching rapidly. She could hear the rattle of its trappings as the driver snapped his whip, moving the team along smartly. Turning up the collar of her cape, she pulled the horse to the side of the road to allow the vehicle to pass. As it whirled by, Geneviève averted her face from the light thrown off by the flickering lamps on the coachman's box. But the driver only glanced curiously at her as the wheels of the vehicle threw up billowing clouds of dust.

By the lamplight of the carriage racing on ahead, she saw the fork leading to the mountains. Turning onto the red clay road, Geneviève allowed the horse to find his own way through the dark, pressing him only when he slowed his pace. The road began to climb steeply, leaving behind the outskirts of the city.

A heavy cloudbank obscured the moon, and overhanging trees formed a dark, leafy canopy above her head. She was suddenly conscious of the unnerving quiet of the mountains after the noise of the city's garrulous tenants. Looking down at the clustered lights of Port-au-Prince, she had to fight her desire to ride back to its relative security. She turned again to the faint outline of the road ahead and urged the horse on.

Rather than give way to fear of the darkness, she turned her mind to d'Villiers. She knew the comte considered her flight with Judson a humiliation that held him up to ridicule before all of Saint-Domigue. The risk she was taking was great. D'Villiers' need for revenge might be greater than his desire for her. Indeed, did he desire her any longer? His relentless tracking of her could point to a determination to punish her for the shame she had brought him. Geneviève hadn't forgotten his ungovernable temper, nor his warped sense of pride. D'Villiers would as likely kill her as accept her in exchange for Judson. Her chance was a slender one, she admitted. Her one advantage lay in his need to possess her totally. She would endure this in exchange for Judson's life, but her dread was almost overpowering.

A glimmer of light from the mountain slope above caught

her eye, then disappeared. She thought the light came from the window of a house, possibly d'Villiers' lodge.

Riding around a slight bend in the path and up an incline, she was startled to see an imposing structure looming above her. The lodge was two stories high, of massive timbers and rockwork. Supported by a protruding granite ledge as a foundation, the house appeared to have sprung from the rocky face of the mountain. An enormous terrace bordered by a stone parapet swept across the façade of the lodge. The effect was that of a battlement. Geneviève, accustomed to the delicate architecture of Port-au-Prince, recoiled from the house's ominous appearance.

She hoped that this intimidating structure was not the lodge she sought. But another glance at the stone steps that led to the terrace told her otherwise. Imbedded in the wall bordering the stairs, she saw a heavy iron plate bearing d'Villiers' family crest. Geneviève remembered a similar plaque on the wall of his townhouse. How appropriate, she thought, as she stared at the intaglio of a lion standing victorious above a slaughtered lamb. With a shudder, she turned away from the crest.

After tying the gelding to a hitching post, she reluctantly mounted the steps. Turning to look down the mountain from the terrace, she took in the beckoning panorama of the city. The winking lights from ships anchored in the harbor seemed no larger than fireflies. Geneviève felt totally removed from the world below. She thought of Seth and Jean-Baptiste and wondered if they had discovered her absence.

With a hesitant hand, she reached for the iron door-knocker. The sound echoed through the quiet night. After a brief wait, the heavy planked door swung open, and Geneviève stared into the stunned face of Odile.

"Why have you returned, *mademoiselle*?" Odile's anguished tone puzzled Geneviève.

"I have no choice, Odile. I didn't come at my pleasure."

As she waited, Geneviève nervously fingered the folds of her cape. She was remembering the elegant *cocotte* as she had been in d'Villiers' townhouse. Odile had tentatively offered friendship then, but behind it had been jealousy of Geneviève's relationship with her master. She had not considered the *cocotte* as a possible obstacle to her plans. Now that she saw Odile's displeasure at her return, she felt even more

unsure of her success. Odile hesitated, then stepped back and beckoned Geneviève inside.

Passing the *cocotte* in the doorway, she noticed the girl's face was bruised and swollen. Her dark hair, usually so carefully groomed, was mussed, as if she had hastily pressed the locks into place.

"Did he do this to you, Odile?" she questioned.

"Please don't speak of it," Odile said coldly, turning her face away. "You wish to be announced to the Comte d'Villiers, of course. I'll tell him that you've come."

Odile's appearance both surprised and alarmed her. She had never seen the comte physically abuse the *cocotte*, nor could she imagine the girl giving him reason to do so. She seemed intensely loyal and overly anxious to please the man. Geneviève hoped that Odile's battered face wasn't an indication of d'Villiers frame of mind.

As she removed her cape, Geneviève examined the cavernous room in which the *cocotte* had left her. The house was designed to resemble a European hunting lodge. The ceiling of the great room was two stories tall. At the second-story level, a gallery bordered by a railing of heavy timbers encircled the room. Several doors leading from the gallery to the rooms on that level stood slightly ajar. Dominating the room was a stone fireplace, its aperture large enough to admit a man of normal height. Heavy furniture upholstered in fine leather emphasized the masculine atmosphere. Thick rugs were scattered carelessly about the flagstone floor.

The slight air of neglect and disorder surprised Geneviève. The comte demanded nothing short of excellence from his household staff. She couldn't imagine why he would allow the lodge's care to decline. This, coupled with Odile's behavior, alerted Geneviève that something had changed drastically in the time she had been away.

"Geneviève," d'Villiers called from the gallery.

The girl turned abruptly and stared up at him. Her eyes widened in astonishment at the look of genuine pleasure and relief on his face. She had imagined a number of reactions that the comte might have to her arrival, but she had not anticipated unabashed delight. It made her wary.

"Come here, Geneviève," he said softly.

She climbed the stairs to stand before him, each muscle in her body tensed with caution. She lifted her gaze to his face

and was shocked at his haggard appearance. When their eyes met, she wondered at the vulnerability she saw.

"You are more beautiful than I remembered."

Taking her by the shoulders he drew her to him, holding her softly against him. He reached up and gently stroked her cheek with his fingers. Instinctively, she flinched at his touch. At once, the cold cynical mien that she remembered replaced the tenderness in his eyes.

"So, nothing has changed. Then why have you returned?"

Knowing that she must humble herself, she was determined that her humiliation would not be witnessed by Odile or the servants.

"Comte, may we speak in privacy?"

With mock gallantry, d'Villiers held out his hand and indicated a room to his right.

A log burned in the stone fireplace, but still Geneviève shivered as she entered his bedchamber. The ceilings were lower in these second-story rooms and were supported by half-timbers. On the planked floor, fur rugs bordered either side of the large mahogany bed. Before the hearth, two leather chairs were situated to afford the pleasure of the fire. Beside the chair nearest her, she noticed a crystal decanter and half-filled brandy snifter resting on a carved wooden trunk. She hoped that he had not been drinking heavily.

"This is as you wished, more private," d'Villiers said with derision. "Will you sit down, *mademoiselle*?"

She shook her head and moved to the fireplace. The comte strode across the room and arrogantly ensconced himself in one of the leather chairs. He studied her intently, sipping the brandy as his eyes traveled over her.

"I've come to you about Judson Talbot."

His face hardened at her words, but he did not reply. He continued watching her, making her task even more difficult. There was little indication of how he might receive her proposal.

"I am offering myself to you in exchange for Captain Talbot's freedom. If you should agree, you may do with me as you wish. You have my word that I wouldn't resist you, nor attempt to escape."

"Then you have come to me for Talbot's sake." He leaned back in his chair and considered her. "*Mademoiselle*, you place a high price on yourself. Judson Talbot cannot be



released with ease. The man is a criminal. He has been cited for attacking me, for kidnapping you and for murdering Jacques Argo. No, such a man could not easily be released. A public outcry would rise against the man who attempted it."

"Let's not cavil. You, and only you, have the power and authority to have him freed. A public outcry against the Comte d'Villiers in Saint-Domingue would be unthinkable."

"I didn't realize you held me in such esteem. There is truth in what you say, my dear. But, this is also a matter of pride. Surely, you can't expect me to offer freedom to the man responsible for so many of my misfortunes?"

"If you desired his freedom, comte, I feel certain his release would present few difficulties."

The comte lunged forward in his chair, his face a mask of rage. "I shall *never* free Judson Talbot." He watched her stricken expression with pleasure before continuing. "But, should he escape . . . who could be blamed?"

Geneviève felt ill. D'Villiers' vicious baiting came as no surprise, but the thought that she might fail in her petition for Judson left her terrified. She clasped her hands behind her back to hide their trembling.

"You have nothing to say to my proposal?" he prompted.

Her small, stubborn chin lifted. "My only concern is that he come to no harm. The method you choose to release Captain Talbot is of no consequence, but I can't imagine that an escape would be without risks."

"You're naïve, Geneviève. If I chose, every prisoner held in the compound at Port-au-Prince would be swept into the streets at my order. And, I might assure you, none would be harmed. Your Captain Talbot is an exception, however. If he's to escape harm, it will be imperative that he follow my instructions. That would be difficult for him, I imagine." D'Villiers smiled. "He isn't given to taking orders."

"If you tell him the request comes from me, that will make the difference," Geneviève said eagerly. "Will you do it?"

"Don't be so quick. What assurance do I have of your sincerity? I'll do nothing until I'm confident of your word."

Geneviève stepped from the hearth. Undoing the buttons at her bodice, she allowed her gown to fall open. The garment slipped from her shoulders and slid down the curve of her hips to the floor. The firelight shone on her body, turning her skin gold. As she lifted her hands to her hair, she was aware of the weight of her breasts as they rose provocatively. She

slipped the comb from her hair, and the auburn curls cascaded about her shoulders and down her back to her waist. She saw the hunger in the comte's face and moved forward until she stood before him defiantly. Slowly, she slid her hands up the planes of her belly to cup her full, high breasts, offering them to him.

D'Villiers' hands encircled her waist and pressed her down to the thick rug before the fire. He stripped her clothing away and lowered himself to her, demanding the pleasure she offered. She felt nothing except the numbness of her limbs and the weight of his body on hers. His mouth covered her and his hands caressed her skin, but she felt no response, nothing.

He entered her fiercely, gripping her so tightly that she could not breathe. She felt he would not release her until he had wrung a response from her body. In desperation, she forced a moan of passion and met his embrace with eagerness. When he was finally sated, he lay beside her in silence. Geneviève knew only the chill of the room on her naked skin.

"You are well worth Judson Talbot, Geneviève. I'll do as you ask." He allowed his hand to trail down the length of her body. "But I must add one stipulation to our agreement."

"Yes?" she asked, turning her face to him.

"If I should arrange to have Talbot escape, you'll consent to become my wife."

Geneviève felt a sickening lurch in her belly. Her nails dug into the fur rug as she fought for control of her feelings. Hadn't it been enough to take this hated man into her body? She had known he would try to manipulate her if she returned to him, but marriage to a man she didn't love was impossible. Marriage was sacred. She would rather die. Her mind raged against the thought of such a travesty.

Gradually, she forced the panic from her. She knew that regardless of her decision, she would never see Judson again. If she agreed to the comte's stipulation, she could at least offer Judson his life, if not her love. Though she was uncertain even of this.

"Have you an answer for me?" d'Villiers demanded.

Before she responded, Geneviève studied the comte's features. She noted the change in his eyes when he looked at her. There was obvious cruelty in the handsome dark-skinned face. The features were corrupted by the character of the man. Could she force herself to live with him?

"Have you an answer for me?" d'Villiers demanded.

"No, I must think. I hadn't anticipated this request."

"Geneviève," he said pulling her to him, "you must decide now. I needn't remind you that I won't wait."

She broke away from his grip and turned her back to him. Although she still resisted the thought, she knew she had no choice. If she dared reject him a second time, he would most certainly take out his revenge on Judson.

"Your decision, Geneviève?" he pressed.

She turned and stared directly into his eyes.

"I'll become your wife, if you agree to arrange for Judson Talbot's escape." She felt calmer now that the words were out.

"He will be allowed to escape. Shouldn't we confirm our pact?" he smiled, embracing her once more.

With resignation beyond despair, she allowed herself to be taken.

Geneviève slipped from the bed with care to avoid waking the comte. She had only pretended sleep to avoid his attentions. When she was sure that he slept deeply, her one thought had been to escape his presence, if only for a short while.

She bathed quickly with water from the pitcher beside the bed, fastened her gown, and walked out to the gallery. A feeble fire burned on the hearth in the room below. Odile sat huddled in its warmth. The girl looked pitifully small and alone.

Geneviève descended the stairs and seated herself quietly on the hearthstone beside the *cocotte*. Odile looked up with an expression of pain and hatred.

"Why? Why did you come back? Everything is ruined for me now," the girl cried.

"Odile, please listen to me. Never has any action caused me more pain than returning to this place. I've come in exchange for Judson Talbot's life. I love him deeply. If I hadn't returned here, Captain Talbot would certainly have been killed on my account. Please believe I had no wish to spoil your plans."

Odile dropped her face to her hands. Soft, broken sobs wracked her small body. Geneviève touched the girl gently.

"Odile, surely you can't love him? You couldn't love a man who would abuse you so. He did this to your face?"

"Yes," the girl whispered, her tears subsiding. "But it didn't happen as you imagine."

"How then?" Geneviève asked, puzzled.

Odile hesitated, then plunged on. "While you were away, *mademoiselle*, the comte came to me often for comfort. More and more he turned to me, until I believed I would become his companion as well as his lover. This was my dream. Was I foolish to want it? But, as you know, it isn't to be. It's you he desires."

Geneviève sighed deeply. Why couldn't d'Villiers have fallen in love with Odile, a woman who would be totally devoted to him. "What about the bruises on your face, Odile?"

The *cocotte* looked away. "As I said, the comte often came to me. But lovemaking wasn't always possible for him. You understand? When he was incapable, he would become very angry. His pride is great, as you know, *mademoiselle*."

"So he beat you for his impotence?" She felt the blood rise to her face in a wave of fury as she thought of d'Villiers abuse of the small woman. "He isn't fit to live," she spat.

Odile couldn't suppress a smile at Geneviève's show of temper. "I've found it most difficult to hate you, *mademoiselle*. Though at times I've succeeded well enough," she admitted.

"Odile, a woman once told me that I shouldn't waste myself hating her. Though I still have no love for her, the advice was sound. Don't waste yourself hating me. I've done you a great service, though you might not realize it."

"In respect to the comte?"

"Yes. You're an exceptionally lovely woman. There must be many who would want you as a wife."

"That will never come to be, so long as the comte lives. Even if he doesn't want me, he would never allow another to take me."

"We'll see, Odile. Since it's my misfortune to remain with the Comte d'Villiers, I might be able to help solve that problem."

Odile noticed the lift of Geneviève's chin as she spoke. The *cocotte* had no faith in a future free of the comte's domination, but she respected that small gesture.

"I haven't told you all that I must do to secure Captain Talbot's release," she said hesitantly.

But Odile's raised hand stopped her words. "It isn't

necessary to explain. He's desired you as his wife from the first. We needn't speak of it."

"Odile, we'll both need a friend. We may still find that friendship in each other."

Before Odile could reply, the comte's voice startled the women. "You've become reacquainted, I see," he said from the gallery as he looked down at the women. "Geneviève, I wish to speak with you."

As his boots clattered on the stairway, Odile rose to withdraw.

"No, Odile. You will stay. Has Geneviève confided in you that she will become the Comtesse d'Villiers within a few hours?" He smiled maliciously.

"Yes, she has told me," the *cocotte* replied quietly, dropping her gaze.

"Have you no congratulations, Odile? Your lack of manners surprises me."

"Comte d'Villiers, I offer my congratulations. I wish you every happiness, *mademoiselle*," the *cocotte* said in a stricken, barely audible voice.

"That's better, Odile," he said, pulling on his riding gloves. "There's much to do in a short time. I'm riding to Port-au-Prince this morning to make certain arrangements, Geneviève. When I return, I'll bring the priest. I expect you to be prepared for the ceremony, my dear. And you, Odile, will assist her in every way. There will no sulking, is that understood?"

"Yes," the *cocotte* replied.

He studied the two silent women, then turned to Odile once more. "Also, Odile, you can be of the greatest help. Didn't you fashion a gown, a wedding gown, for yourself at one time? The garment is still in your wardrobe, I believe."

A gasp escaped Geneviève's lips as the comte's purpose became clear. If Odile had sewn a wedding gown for herself, it could only have been intended for the day she hoped to marry the comte. Of course, he would know this.

"You will have the gown made ready for Geneviève to wear for the marriage ceremony," d'Villiers finished.

Trying desperately to avert this humiliation of Odile, Geneviève spoke as calmly as possible through her rage to d'Villiers. "Comte, isn't it obvious to you that Odile's gown would be far too small for me to wear? She is a tiny woman. The dress would never fit."

"Then she will alter the gown for you. Yes, Odile? Odile is an accomplished seamstress." The comte smiled.

The *cocotte* had not spoken but, at the comte's words, she had flinched as if touched by a whip. Geneviève watched helplessly as he dismissed the girl.

"If a man's life wasn't at stake, no power on earth could bind me to you," she blazed.

D'Villiers grasped her wrist and pulled her up from the hearth to stand beside him. "Don't glare at me. The girl was presumptuous; it wasn't fitting. But let's talk about a more pleasant subject. When I return, you'll be dressed for the ceremony. The diamond pendant, which you left with me when you departed my house so hastily, will be returned to you. You will wear it. You should be a magnificent bride."

"Will you release Judson Talbot as you agreed?"

"Yes, I'll see that it's done. But you mustn't have second thoughts about our marriage. Should you be gone when I return, Judson Talbot's blood will be on your hands."

"You have my word, I'll be here."

"There's one more thing," he added harshly. "It isn't only your body I intend to have; I'll have your love as well. I know that you've come to me only because you wish to save Judson Talbot's neck. That will pass. Of this I'm certain, because there is nothing I wouldn't do to secure your love. That is the difference between Talbot and me. For him there are limits. For me there are none."

Before she could reply, d'Villiers turned sharply and strode from the room, leaving her furious and disgusted. When he had gone, Odile called to Geneviève.

"Come, we must do as he says," the girl urged.

Odile helped Geneviève into the cream lace gown she had hoped to wear for her own wedding and then knelt to begin lengthening the hem. Geneviève felt ashamed that she must be a part of this degrading task d'Villiers had forced on the *cocotte*.

"Odile, this is a lovely gown. It's even more outrageous that the comte would buy the material for you, allow you to complete the dress and then force you to give it to me.

"*Mademoiselle*, he didn't buy the material."

"But, Odile, how . . . ?" Geneviève stopped, not wishing to be tactless. She knew the *cocotte* could never have afforded the costly lace.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend to pry."

"A friend of mine is a dressmaker, *mademoiselle*," Odile said, as her small fingers worked the material. "When she learned of my hopes to be married, she began to save a few pieces of her finest lace. She fashions gowns for the wives of the elite, you see. It was a terrible risk she took. Should one of the ladies have discovered that she held back the scraps, she would have ordered my friend to be whipped. But my friend is stubborn. She saved until there was enough for a gown. And't that's how it came to be." The *cocotte* smile proudly.

Before Geneviève realized it, scalding tears were pouring down her cheeks.

"Don't fret, *mademoiselle*," Odile soothed. "You can do nothing, nor can I. As you said, perhaps this won't always be so."

The comte urged his stallion down the mountain at a dangerous pace. He was well satisfied with the events of the morning, and eager to complete his affairs in Port-au-Prince as quickly as possible.

The matter of Talbot must be dispatched. His eyes narrowed at the thought that regardless of what he had promised Geneviève, Judson Talbot must die. So long as Talbot lived, he knew he had no chance of winning her affection. Yes, he would arrange for Talbot's escape, but he would also arrange for it to fail. The utmost care would be used to make it appear an accident. Geneviève could never know she had been betrayed.

## *Chapter 22*

A hovering blanket of fog lay over the coastland of Saint-Domingue. It crept slowly upward, silently enveloping the higher reaches of the mountains. Wisps of it were already making their way up to the summer home of the Comte d'Villiers. From behind one of the lodge's tall windows, a woman stood watching the road. To her, this imposing structure was a menace to all that spread out below it.

It was noon, her wedding day, and she shivered in anticipation of what the hours ahead would bring. The tumult of the events of the past twenty-four hours was almost too much for her to comprehend. Although she was weary, sleep held no solace. Geneviève's tiredness was making it easier for her to feel sorry for herself. And who had more right to such self-indulgence? It seemed that every malignant force in the universe had been focused on her. The past few months had been an endless struggle for survival. Yet, through it all, she had clung to the hope, however illusive, that it was only a trial and that she would emerge from it, bruised but whole. Now she wasn't so sure.

By her own intrigues, she was only hours away from becoming the wife of a man she loathed. A feeling of nausea accompanied the thought of having to endure his touch again. How could she face it for a lifetime? The bitter tears that had been welling up in her eyes overflowed and ran in crooked



rivulets down her cheeks. She saw the advancing fog below as a tangible wall separating her from the only man she wanted to love.

Geneviève braced her back and tried to shake these thoughts from her mind. Dwelling on them was torturing her. And after all, life was unkind to many people.

Her eyes scanned again the road leading from Port-au-Prince. She was waiting for Seth and Jean-Baptiste. They would be trying to find her and it was only a matter of time before they realized where she was. If only they would come now, she thought, while the comte was away. As it was, the meeting would not be a pleasant one, but there would be real trouble if the comte were present. She had no idea what she would say to them, except that she must convince them of the soundness and inevitability of her decision. The task was much harder because, in her heart, she wanted what they wanted. Then, as if in answer to her wishes, she saw them emerge from the trees on the road below. Her heart began to thump against her chest as she wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Odile," she called, "there are riders approaching. They're my friends," she continued when the woman joined her at the window, "and I must ask you not to tell the comte they were here. Leave everything to me. They will want me to go with them, but I must refuse." She smiled encouragingly at the *cocotte* and touched her shoulder. "I would prefer to do this alone. The comte will be angry if he discovers I've talked to them, so the less you know of this the better. I wouldn't want you to be punished. Do you agree?"

The *cocotte* nodded but her brow remained creased in doubt. "If they are your friends, *mademoiselle*, they will be firm with you, no? You won't change your mind?"

Geneviève's answer held irritation. "Odile, I've told you. How can I change my mind?"

"I only ask because if you leave with them, then I must leave also. The comte will kill me." She spoke this simple truth without guile and Geneviève touched her again for comfort. She thought she was seeing the beginnings of Odile's independence.

"Trust me, please. Go, now, I'll let them in."

Odile did as she was told, but she did not go far. She remained close enough to overhear the agitated voices of the

two men who joined Geneviève in the great room of the lodge.

Seth reached Geneviève first and pulled her to him in a rough embrace. "Geneviève, what are you trying to do?"

Reluctantly, she pushed back from him and composed her features so as not to betray her true feelings. Both men were held in her steady gaze. "You said last night, Jean-Baptiste, that you were no match for the comte's power. I'm the only one who can influence him to free Judson. I did what had to be done."

Seth blanched. "Geneviève," he whispered, "what did you do?"

"But you misunderstood me, *mademoiselle*," Jean-Baptiste rushed to say. "I have no influence over the man, but there are other ways to deal with these situations. We have a plan already that is sure to work, if you will only listen."

She felt an unbidden spark of hope rise within her at his words and clasped her hands together to prevent them from trembling. "Tell me, Jean-Baptiste. But, I beg of you, don't deceive me."

"It has been arranged that Judson's own ship will be taken by my men tonight and will be waiting for us in a cove just south of here. As this is being done, Seth and I will enter the prison compound and liberate your Judson from those lazy, unsuspecting guards. I know the prison and I know whom to trust inside. It should be a simple matter, since no one will be expecting us. The element of surprise is on our side, *mademoiselle*. And we won't be dealing with the comte at all, except to foil his plans."

"He's done this sort of thing before, Geneviève," Seth interjected.

Jean-Baptiste had spoken with total confidence, but Geneviève had doubts about this radical plan. It seemed all too easy, yet she listened as he continued.

"Once we have Judson, we'll make haste for the cove. He'll be whisked away from Saint-Domingue before the comte realizes what has happened."

"And what about me?" she asked. "Will I be waiting on the *Liberté* for you?"

Jean-Baptiste glanced briefly at Seth. "No," he said, hesitating. "It would be best for you to leave the island immediately. And," he said as he walked to the window, "we should

start now. We passed the comte on our way up the mountain. If we hurry, we should be able to reach Port-au-Prince before he returns."

"And then what?" she asked suspiciously.

"We'll pay a ship's captain to sail you directly to Savannah."

"But why should I leave before the *Liberté*? Isn't it because you're not sure your plan will work? You think that something may happen to the three of you and that I'll be left without protection."

Seth jumped to Jean-Baptiste's defense. "No, Geneviève. This was my idea. It isn't logical for you to wait until tonight when you can be free of this place sooner. Why take a chance? Our plan will go safely, don't worry. Come now, Jean-Baptiste is right. We must hurry."

Realizing the awful truth of what she had suspected, Geneviève sat heavily in the chair nearest her and leaned against its tall back. She took a long, slow breath before speaking. When she began, her voice was remarkably calm.

"You have not succeeded in convincing me, my two dear friends. Your plan is too dangerous to consider. Do you think I want you to lose your lives to save Judson? And Judson, too, would be in peril. No," she sighed, "this must be done my way."

"And, what is that?" demanded Seth, not attempting to disguise his frustration.

"The comte has agreed to arrange for Judson to escape from the compound tonight. He's arranging for it now in Port-au-Prince. Because of his arrogance, he refused to withdraw the charges against Judson, but at least he will go free."

Jean-Baptiste's eyes narrowed. "*Mademoiselle*, such generosity is unlike the Comte d'Villiers. What prompted him to this agreement?"

Geneviève opened her mouth, but the words would not come.

"What are you keeping from us?" Seth asked, anxiety rising in his voice.

"I have agreed to become his wife."

"*Bon Dieu*," breathed Jean-Baptiste.

Seth paced the flagstone floor, brushing his hair from his face irritably. "I don't believe you," he mumbled.

"It's true, Seth. If there were another way, I would have

taken it. Judson was imprisoned because of me and only I can secure his freedom. Why must you stubbornly refuse to see that?"

"It is you who are stubborn," Seth roared. "You rushed off into the night without a word of warning to Jean-Baptiste or me. I'm tempted to take you by force and deposit you, bound if need be, aboard a ship for Savannah."

Geneviève left her chair and approached him. "If you should, Seth, I would never forgive you. Isn't it clear that I've made my decision and intend to stand by it?" The even tone of her voice caused Seth's expression to turn from one of anger to defeat.

"Mademoiselle, forgive me," Jean-Baptiste said gently, "but I must say that I understand why you're doing this. It is very brave. Yet, you know the Comte d'Villiers is a treacherous man. He would think nothing of taking you as his legal wife, then betraying you by having Judson killed." He shrugged eloquently. "How can you sacrifice so much to such a man?"

"I don't deny what you say is true, Jean-Baptiste. But he is determined that I should care for him as well as become his wife. He wouldn't be foolish enough to think that I could ever care for the man who killed Judson Talbot. To betray me would not be to his advantage, and the Comte d'Villiers, you must admit, always looks to his own interests."

"Perhaps," he said, unconvinced. "I hope most fervently that you are not mistaken."

"But she *is* mistaken!" Seth shouted and started toward Geneviève. "Come, Jean-Baptiste, we'll take her as we said we would. I've had enough of this senseless talk."

Geneviève knew that if they wanted to take her by force she could do nothing to stop them. She had to say the right thing now or all would be lost.

"If you two would only stop to think," she told them calmly, "you would see the stupidity of what you are trying to do. You're thinking of seeing me to safety but, when the comte finds me gone, Judson will be dead before you have a chance to try your escape plan."

"Not if we go in now instead of waiting until tonight," Seth threw back.

"But then you won't have his ship, will you?"

Seth looked at Jean-Baptiste for an answer but received silence. Finally, he spoke. "It seems as if we've lost, my

friend. I don't think she'll change her mind, and she is right about alerting the comte. We must abide by her wishes."

"Thank you, Jean-Baptiste," Geneviève said, unsmiling, looking at Seth. "Thank you both for trying."

Seth held her tightly to him before he left, his cheek against the softness of her hair. No words were needed to express what they felt at this parting. Both were treating it with finality. When he could no longer bear the ache in his throat, Seth broke away to follow Jean-Baptiste to the door.

Geneviève closed it hastily behind them. She had no desire to watch them ride away from her. There was no need to prolong the pain. Her eyes fixed on the fierce ugliness of a huge boar's head mounted on the opposite wall as she struggled to keep them dry.

Seth led the way down the mountain. His impatience at what he was being forced to do was evident in the cruel pressure he exerted on his horse's reins.

Jean-Baptiste nudged his mount to come abreast of him. "Don't punish your horse for your sorrows, my friend," he advised. "You will need him tonight."

Instead of loosening his grip, Seth pulled the horse up short. He took a deep breath and ran his outspread fingers slowly through his fine, blond hair. His face contorted with anguish, revealed the emotional storm that clashed within him. He spoke to his companion, but his eyes were focused on the ground. "I refuse to be a part of this," he said through clenched teeth.

"Wait. . . ."

"*Damn it, Jean-Baptiste,*" he lashed out, turning to meet the other man's eyes. "I don't want to be responsible for Judson's death, but if I'm forced to make a choice I'll see him dead rather than have Geneviève suffer at the hands of that despicable creature, d Villiers." He closed his eyes tightly and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers as if to subdue his stubbornness.

"I will never again have a peaceful thought," he continued, "if I leave her to him. I don't care if she hates me for it. That's a small price to pay to free her from a lifetime of degradation. I'm going back for her," he said decisively, turning his horse.

Jean-Baptiste put out his arm to stop him. "*Seth.* Listen to me, please. I have no intention of abandoning Geneviève. It only occurred to me that if we let her remain with the comte

today and don't alarm him, our chance of safely rescuing both Judson and her will be greatly increased."

"What do you mean?"

"Much of what she said was true. Our chances of freeing Judson from the compound are not as great as I would have you believe. If we take Geneviève now, Judson will surely die for it. But if we wait for the comte to initiate an escape, perhaps we can foil his plan and snatch Judson away from him."

"You are making no sense, Jean-Baptiste. Why try to foil Judson's escape? Isn't that the very thing we want?"

"Of course," he answered with a wry grin. "But you don't think Judson will emerge alive from the comte's plan, do you? All he must do to satisfy Geneviève is set up an escape. If something goes wrong, she cannot blame him. This is the way it will happen, Seth, mark my words. The comte is too smart to allow Judson to remain alive. With Judson alive, he could never be sure of her."

"Still," Seth protested, "I can't take the chance of leaving her. He might marry her before tonight. You don't know that woman as I do, Jean-Baptiste. If she speaks vows before the Church, she will consider them binding, however repulsive. We will have lost her forever." He was leaning forward in his entreaty.

"Then the plan will have to be altered. The comte may have to meet with a fatal accident." Seth did not doubt the determined look on his friend's face.

"Besides," continued Jean-Baptiste, "it is impossible to take Geneviève now. She is suddenly, pardon the expression, a madwoman when it comes to Judson. She would fight us all the way and we might end up losing both of them." He stood in the stirrups to stretch his tense legs, then sat and nudged his horse ahead down the mountain. He knew that Seth would follow.

It was late afternoon when the Comte d'Villiers returned up the mountain road. His arrangements in Port-au-Prince had gone well. For a man who so enjoyed the manipulation of high government officials, his reception in the city had been gratifying. Their trembling obedience had been a confirmation of his power. The sycophants, he laughed. There wasn't a man among them.

He felt that he had handily disposed of the problem of

Judson Talbot in such a way that Geneviève would never be the wiser. The priest, however, had presented more of a problem than he had anticipated. He had chafed at the delay, but he had finally found one who possessed few scruples and was in dire need of money. The comte was adamant that the marriage be blessed by a priest. Geneviève would consider her vows sacred, and that would forge one more shackle to bind her to him. He smiled with satisfaction.

Glancing over his shoulder, he searched for the priest who was riding behind him. The comte was annoyed to find that the thick fog had hidden the man from his view. Irritably, he jerked the stallion to a halt and waited for the priest to overtake him.

The Comte d'Villiers would never have admitted to a belief in superstition, but the heavy coils of fog enveloping the mountain made him uneasy. Even the stallion seemed affected. The big horse pressed against his heavy curb bit and crab-stepped on the road, ignoring his rider's cruel pressure on the rein.

When the priest appeared through the fog, the comte shouted for him to increase his pace. Frantically, the black-clad man kicked at the sides of his small, shabby horse, demanding every bit of speed the underfed animal could produce. Impatiently the comte gave the stallion his head and bolted up the mountain, once more leaving the priest behind.

"You are most beautiful in the gown," Odile said gently. It was true, and the *cocotte* had to admit it even though the gown, which had represented all her hopes for so long, adorned another. She felt the sting of tears behind her lids and quickly averted her eyes to look for the hairbrush.

Swiftly, she brushed Geneviève's hair before pinning the auburn tresses into a chignon. Soft waves enhanced her delicate cheekbones, and the *cocotte* arranged the tendrils that fell from the chignon into shining curls. Carefully lifting the fragile lace of the veil, Odile settled a small silken cap on Geneviève's hair and draped the veil gracefully over her head and shoulders. She adjusted a fold of lace and stepped back to view her handiwork.

"I feel sure there has never been a more beautiful bride in Saint-Domingue." She forced the words. The difficulty came in talking. If she could only be silent, the pretense would be easier.

"You are much too generous, Odile." Geneviève smiled sadly. She pitied the *cocotte* for what she must be going through. "Tell me about this priest. Is he truly of the Church?"

"Yes, he is of the Church," she answered hesitantly.

"Please be candid with me," directed Geneviève.

Odile did not look at her when she spoke, but busied herself unnecessarily with rearranging folds and tucks in the wedding gown. "There are some priests on this island who do not act as they should. Certain of them, for large sums of money, will do as the planters desire. It is useful to have money, no?"

"And one of them was probably the only priest the comte could obtain, wasn't he, Odile?"

Odile nodded vigorously but did not add to this supposition. Only when she felt the pressure of Geneviève's eyes still upon her did she elaborate.

"The comte was excommunicated from the Church," she whispered. "This was shortly before you came to the island."

"And the reason?"

"There was a priest, Father Laroue, who did not accept the behavior of the *grands blancs*. Many of the Church have learned to turn their faces from the sins of the planters. This is wise, you see, and far more pleasant for them. But not Father Laroue. He publicly censored the comte for his treatment of the slaves at Bel Jardin." Odile turned away, wishing to abandon the story.

"What happened to him?" pressed Geneviève.

The *cocotte* frowned at having to continue but she did, keeping her voice low. "The comte ordered the priest to be taken to the market place. There he was stripped of his robes and flogged through the streets."

"Who," asked Geneviève, truly amazed, "could he order to do such a thing?"

"The gendarmerie, of course. And the government officials did nothing to stop it."

"What became of him?"

"He was close to death, but he survived. When he could travel, he was recalled to France. The excommunication was ordered from there."

Geneviève shook her head slowly in disbelief. "Why does he want to bother with a priest at all?"

"It is because he knows you'll consider your vows before a



man of God to be sacred. He'll be certain that you will never leave him," Odile said softly.

Staring blankly into the mirror before her, Geneviève began to understand the lengths to which this man would go to possess her. There would be no escape from him.

Unaware of herself for the moment, Geneviève continued to sit before the mirror. Had it not been for the look of utter misery on her face and the deep violet shadows beneath her eyes, she would have been an exquisite bride-to-be. The wedding gown, of fine cream lace lined in a delicate hue of pink silk, was the perfect foil for Geneviève's golden coloring and auburn hair. The tapered skirt of the dress flowed into a short train bordered with heavily embroidered scallops. The scalloped neckline and long, tight sleeves, finished a creation that would have been more appropriate for a wedding held in a cathedral.

"He says you should wear this," said Odile from somewhere outside Geneviève's consciousness. She felt the *cocotte* press something into her hand. It was a blue velvet pouch, and from it Geneviève withdrew the d'Binet diamond. Immediately, it caught what little light there was in the room and sparkled magnificently in her hand, mesmerizing her.

Odile took the diamond and clasped its golden chain around Geneviève's neck. Geneviève stood and walked closer to the mirror. And it seemed to Odile, watching from behind her, that a remarkable transformation took place. The look of despair disappeared as if by magic and was replaced by an expression of pure joy. Her green eyes began to sparkle like the diamond at her breast. The small chin rose slowly as she moistened her lips with her tongue, and the color returned to her cheeks. She was radiant.

Perhaps it was the d'Binet diamond, suddenly hers again. Perhaps it was her inability to face reality for the moment, but Geneviève thought she was back at Jasper's Landing. Rachel was standing behind her—she could see her in the mirror—and she was beaming at Geneviève in the splendor of her wedding gown. What a wonderful day this was to be, a day when all eyes would be on her. Yet, the only eyes she sought were those warm, brilliant blue eyes belonging to Judson Talbot, the man she was to marry. He was downstairs just now, nervously waiting with Guy-Pierre and Seth and the other men in the large wedding party. She could imagine him so vividly as he stood near the open doors of the gaily

decorated ballroom. Drifting on the breeze to the upper windows of the house she could smell the savory odors of the postwedding feast being prepared. And her gown was exquisite, perfect for her coloring. She smiled at Rachel. It was to be glorious. . . .

"*Mademoiselle!*"

She was recalled from her reverie by an insistent voice. It was Odile. "Are you feeling unwell, *mademoiselle?*"

"What? Oh, no, Odile. I'm fine."

"Good. We must go down now. Everything is ready."

"Yes, Odile," she said vaguely. "Only let me take your arm."

Halting at the top of the stairway, Geneviève stared at the Comte d'Villiers as he stood looking up at her. "A stranger might have considered him handsome in his black tailored frockcoat and tight-fitting breeches. But to her, the hard face and muscled body conveyed only brutality. The fact that this day, this hour, he would become her husband was inconceivable. She allowed herself to dwell on the travesty one last time.

But it was not the comte who was at the center of her thoughts. It was Judson. Her stomach churned as she thought of him in prison, his life in danger because of her.

She thought back on the moment when she learned that he was the boy from Savannah those many years ago. She recalled the moment when she first admitted to herself that she loved him. It was just after she had talked to Seth about passion, although she had not mentioned the word. Now, no one understood its nature better than she. The passion she had experienced with Judson last evening was of such intensity and abundance that it would endure for a lifetime. But this could not be. If she did not terminate their passion and marry d'Villiers, then Judson would die. There is no question that this is the better way, she thought, and descended the stairs to her fate.

The comte walked over to her and took her hand in his. "You are truly a magnificent woman," he said, his voice awed. "I would have you at any cost. No man living could resist you as you are tonight."

Geneviève lowered her eyes so as not to look at him. He mistook it for a bashful gesture. "Let us begin at once," he said, a look of extraordinary pleasure on his face.

Geneviève glanced across the room at the dark faces of

the servants who stood along the wall. They were allowed to watch the ceremony, as was the custom, but their faces showed no more pleasure than Geneviève's. Her eyes turned to the priest as he positioned himself before the fireplace.

Father Mate's robes were dusty and his hands trembled slightly as he held the small prayer book. Geneviève found that he could not meet her gaze, but looked away each time her eyes sought his. She was acutely aware that she was about to be married by a priest who would certainly have been defrocked had he lived in any other society. She felt a stab of pity for this man of the cloth, descended to the despised role of sycophant to d'Villiers and his kind.

"*Mademoiselle*," Father Mate motioned hesitantly, "would you stand beside the Comte d'Villiers?"

She moved to the comte's side and felt his fingers close on her arm.

The comte ate heartily, calling often for more wine. While he ate, his eyes never left her.

"Geneviève," he said, "if there is any doubt in your mind that the document you signed today is sound, I assure you that it's legally binding. The court of Saint-Domingue would gladly validate that you're the Comtesse d'Villiers, should you conveniently forget."

"I will never forget," she murmured as she moved the food about her plate with her fork.

"Good," he said, pushing his plate aside. He raised a crystal goblet to her. "A toast then, *comtesse*. To your change of heart." His eyes narrowed. "Even as my wife, you long for your Captain Talbot. No, don't deny it. But that won't always be so. You are a woman of strong needs, Geneviève. In time, your body will betray you and you'll turn to the one most able to fulfill those needs. So, shall we drink to that future time?"

A smile crossed Geneviève's face as she raised her goblet and drank—to her own future. She was thinking of her dream before the mirror, when she was back at Jasper's Landing with Judson. It was so real that it had seemed true. She knew she could cause it to return at any time. She could spend as much of her life in that dream as she chose.

The comte took great pleasure from her silent smile. He drained his glass and rose from the table. "I regret that I can't

enjoy the pleasures of our marriage bed at once, Geneviève. But I must see that all goes well with your friend's escape." He caught her chin in his hand and lifted her face to his. "When I return tonight, you will receive me gladly as your husband. *Au revoir, comtesse.*"

## *Chapter 23*

Judson watched the dim light of dawn grow bolder as he waited for the comte. The morning wore on and still he did not come. No one came. He did not know the reason for this unaccountable silence, and as he sat on the floor of the damp cell, his anxiety grew.

His jailers were just as baffled as he, for they, too, had expected the Comte d'Villiers to arrive long before now. They could do nothing with the prisoner until they had word from him. They could not even take him food or drink.

The morning turned to afternoon and Port-au-Prince became enveloped in an ominous, milky fog. Judson listened to the rumbling in his stomach and thought about Geneviève.

Images over which he had no conscious control passed through his mind. One moment, he saw Geneviève's face in the throes of passion, as he had seen it just last night. The next, he saw her face contorted in abject fear. She was backing away from him, or someone, and it scared him. There were times when he could see a crystal-clear image of the young Genny. She would be laughing; then, suddenly, she, too, would be frightened. He put his hands to his eyes in a futile attempt to shut out the unpleasant scenes. But they only became more vivid. It was then that he saw, in perfect detail, Geneviève standing beside the Comte d'Villiers. They were both smiling. Judson leapt to his feet and gripped the

moisture-coated bars of his cell. He felt his body flush with anger and frustration, and a cold sweat began to cover his skin. Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he screamed out the name of d'Villiers. It was a sound of agony.

As his voice echoed through the empty corridor, a door opened and one of the guards poked his head through to listen for a moment. Then it was shut again. The simple, mechanical sound of the bolt being shoved home restored Judson once again to sanity.

Lowering himself to the floor, he sat against the damp stone wall. He drew up his knees and folded his arms across them to pillow his head. At least, he could conserve his energy. It would be needed later in his confrontation with the comte, or in case an opportunity arose for escape. If he was ever to get out of this place, he reasoned, he must remain calm and in control at all time. *They* must be the ones to make a mistake. A slight misjudgment, a careless miscalculation was all he needed. He sat quietly, forcing himself to relax until he drifted into a light sleep.

It was dark when he awoke to the sound of a key turning in the lock. He was on his feet before the four guards reached his cell. They stood in the small circle of light from their lantern and, with a great rattling of keys, the cell was unlocked. One of them barked out an order for him to fall in between them and he was led away.

They passed through the guardroom by a heavy wooden door and into another corridor lined with larger cells. This section of the prison was well-illuminated with candles. Judson was roughly shoved into one of the dank enclosures and found himself in the company of three other prisoners. Thinking all the time that he was finally being taken to the comte, he was astonished and puzzled that they had only transferred him from one cell to another. Something very strange was afoot, and he intended to be alert.

A harsh Cockney accent assaulted him when the guards had departed. "Who are you, matey? Wot's yer *terrible* offense?" The sailor laughed. His words were slurred with drink and he smelled of vomit.

Judson looked past him at the other men without answering. Propped against the wall in the corner was a golden-skinned man. His clothes were in disarray and his face bore the marks of a recent beating. An *homme de couleur*, Judson

thought, whose crime was probably nothing more than staying out past his nine o'clock curfew. The man nodded to Judson and smiled weakly.

"Welcome to the underworld of Port-au-Prince, monsieur," he said mockingly.

"I said, wot's yer offense?" the drunken sailor demanded again.

Judson answered to shut him up. "I'm not an offensive man, sailor. Yet, they say I've behaved badly toward one of their prominent citizens." The answer seemed to satisfy the man, for he closed his eyes then and soon began snoring.

The third man stood by the bars of the door, looking out. He was of medium height and wiry. His tight-fitting overshirt and baggy canvas trousers were grimy, as were his hands and face. A half-circle of limp, tangled hair hung below a pointed bald head, and his patchy beard did little to conceal his ferretlike features.

The *homme de couleur* motioned for Judson to sit. "Forgive my manners, *monsieur*, but I shall not rise. Feel free to join me, unless you fear my color may spread to yours through some strange alchemy."

Judson sat and offered his hand to the young man. "We're not enemies, *monsieur*," he stated in a tone that did not require a response.

Judson eyed the sullen *petit blanc* who continued to stare through the bars. His manner was strange for a prisoner. He looked as if he were expecting someone at any moment, perhaps to come and free him, for surely he couldn't be anticipating the meal that was about to be served?

An elderly jailer had begun serving dinner to the men in the other cells. He was slowly and methodically opening each of the doors and placing inside a ration of hard, dry bread and a bucket of water with a common dipper.

When he noticed the jailer's routine, Judson nudged the man at his side. "Only a moment ago, I was escorted to this cell under heavy guard," he whispered.

"An indication they consider you a dangerous and important criminal, *monsieur*." He laughed.

"True. But now they send this one old man to feed us. If I were dangerous then, how have I suddenly ceased to be so now? Don't you think it strange?"

"To me, everything is strange." He lowered his voice and added, "That's the one who looks dangerous." He indicated the *petit blanc*.

The old jailer was trembling slightly as he approached the last cell. He was nervous for good reason, but he considered the brief discomfort he was about to experience to be well worth the price he would be paid. He was about to be knocked over the head and have his keys taken from him to allow a certain man to escape. The Comte d'Villiers would pay him well for his part in this little plot. He would show the money to his wife and tell her he had finally won at the cock fights. Perhaps tonight she would see him as a winner and bestow her carefully hoarded wifely favors on him.

The old man entered the cell and placed the bucket and bread ration in the center of the floor. While the man's back was to the *petit blanc*, Judson saw a sudden movement and a flash of steel. The jailer moaned and fell squarely over the bucket of water, failing to overturn it.

Slowly, Judson and the *homme de couleur* rose to their feet. They watched in disbelief as the man knelt, extracted his knife from the jailer's back and wiped it clean with his fingers. Smiling, he stood and bowed in their direction. "*Monsieurs*, you may now leave this stinking hole, as I plan to do, or you may stay and rot. It makes no difference to me."

Judson's mind worked rapidly. Why hadn't the guards searched the *petit blanc* and found the knife? Why had they sent one lone old man to their cell? It was all too farfetched. This was a trap, he was sure of it. By all reason, he should stay right where he was. His captors wanted him to escape—or at least attempt it. But there was a chance they would make a mistake. It was his only chance. He would go.

He saw that the *homme de couleur* was waiting for him to make a move. Apparently, he intended to base his decision on Judson's.

"I'm sure this is a trap, my friend," he whispered. "But I must try. Unless your life is at stake, you had better stay here."

"One never knows, *monsieur*. I'll take my chances with you."

The *petit blanc* motioned for them to be quiet and follow.



He led them down the corridor to a door opposite the guardroom, listened, then opened it with the jailer's key. They entered a passageway that led to the prison courtyard at one end. He pointed to a door at the other end and handed the keys to Judson.

"Someone is coming. I'll stop them with this," he whispered, brandishing the large knife. "Get that door open. It leads to the street."

Judson ran toward the door, the *homme de couleur* close behind him.

Outside, in the darkness, another *petit blanc* waited on the flat roof of the building across from the prison. The night was cool, but sweat dripped profusely from his forehead and collected in the hollows of his eyes, causing them to burn. He blinked and drew his sleeve across his face. He had to be able to see clearly. He wiped his clammy hands on his pants and readjusted the heavy gun in his grip. The long-barreled, smoothbore musket would be highly effective for the distance he had chosen, its accuracy only slightly hampered by the heavy, humid fog.

He was obsessively nervous, but not because he was about to kill. That he had done before. It was because he was deathly afraid of the consequences should he miss. There would be no time to reload, so he must down his quarry with the one round. Everything would be over in a matter of seconds. He knew his eye was keen and his hand usually steady. The Comte d'Villiers would never hire a less than excellent marksman. But neither would the comte forgive failure.

He wiped his eyes again and concentrated on the small circle of light below him, through which drifted eerie patterns of mist. "Damn this fog," he muttered in exasperation. It would make his task more difficult. Often, it was so thick as to obscure the rear door of the prison and render opaque the light from the overhanging lantern.

He must keep his wits about him. If all went well, the tall *blanc* would be the first to emerge from the door. He sighted down the long barrel and wiped his hand once more. Yes, the tall *blanc* should be first through the door, but if something had gone amiss, he would wait for an instant to be sure. The shot could not be wasted on the wrong person. If he missed, if the worst should happen, he would have to depend on

his friend with the knife to back him up. *But he must not miss.*

Seth and Jean-Baptiste had twice circled the prison compound. So far, they had seen nothing to arouse their suspicions. They halted in the shadows near the rear door of the prison building, the most likely spot for an escape if the plan were allowed to progress that far.

"What now, Jean-Baptiste?" Seth whispered as he leaned down to massage his ankle.

"I'm not certain, my friend. I had hoped we would find some sign of the comte's activity outside the prison itself, but we've seen nothing, thanks in part to the fog. What a night this is! Let's hope Judson is allowed to reach the outside alive."

"Do you think the comte will dare to let him get this far?"

"The escape must appear genuine to satisfy Geneviève. That much, at least, is in our favor."

"Yet, if not, is it possible for us to get inside?"

"Anything is possible." He smiled. "If that must be our course of action, we won't hesitate to take it. We can't wait out here forever."

Seth was still down on one knee tending to his ankle. He had been looking up at Jean-Baptiste as he spoke. Suddenly, high behind Jean-Baptiste's head, he saw a movement. At first he could not make out its source, but he soon recognized a familiar rodlike shape. He stood and leaned over to whisper to Jean-Baptiste.

"I don't think we will need to go inside. Judson will come to us through that door." He quickly indicated the gun barrel protruding over the rooftop before it was again obscured by the fog. The assassin was atop the very building that shadowed their position.

Both men removed cavalry pistols from beneath their vests. They were excellent weapons, part of the cache of contraband firearms Jean-Baptiste kept hidden in his house for just such an emergency. *Gens de couleur* were forbidden to possess arms.

"Can you get to him?" asked Jean-Baptiste.

Seth nodded grimly.

"Good. I'll position myself near the door to be ready when Judson emerges. I'm certain there will be others. And I trust our retreat will be swift, so we will meet you near the horses.

May fortune be with you, my friend," he said, squeezing Seth's arm.

Seth walked softly but rapidly to the rear of the building. The fog permitted him to see only a few feet in either direction. His fervent hope was that the man on the roof was alone and did not have an accomplice standing guard below. An additional element of surprise could be done without.

He reached the corner of the building and felt his way around it. Thus far, there had been neither a door nor windows at ground level. The building must be a storehouse of some sort. But how would he get to the roof if there were no entrance other than the main one facing the prison? He reached the next corner of the building with no luck and continued down the side. Finding nothing along that wall either, he cursed. There was no time to lose. Judson's life was at stake.

His heart was racing as he retraced his steps. There *must* be another way to the roof, for the assassin was positioned just above the front entrance and would be alerted by anyone going in that way. He began to look up at the wall, hoping to see a ladder of some sort above ground level. Then, along the rear wall, he found it. Hanging just within reach of his outstretched arm was a rope ladder, probably put there by the man himself. He jammed his pistol into the waist of his breeches and reached for it.

He exerted nearly all his strength to pull himself high enough to gain a foothold on the ladder. The task was all the more difficult as he had to prevent himself from swinging and bumping noisily against the side of the building. When his hand finally reached up and found the roofline, he paused to quiet the heavy breathing his efforts had caused. Cautiously, he raised himself onto the flat roof.

Thick fog concealed the assassin, so Seth was forced to advance blindly. He knew that once he saw the man he would be almost upon him. His only advantage was the barely discernible reflection from the light on the street below. He made his way toward it, careful of his steps. If he encountered one creaking board, all would be lost. Then, without warning, there he was, lying spread-eagled on the roof, intent upon the illuminated door below. Two more feet, thought Seth, and he will be within reach. He took one cautious step and heard a terrifying sound. The door below was opening! Behind the

man, Seth could see directly down the barrel of his musket. There in its line of fire was Judson, framed in the prison door.

In one lunging motion, Seth brought the barrel of his pistol down on the assassin's head just at the moment the musket went off in an explosion of fire.

Before opening the door, Judson had stopped and turned to the *homme de couleur*. Pushing him roughly up against the moist stone wall of the passageway, he had said quickly, "Listen to me. I am going to open this door. If there is trouble on the other side, it will be of the mortal kind. You must decide for yourself which is your safest course, remaining here or making a run for it. Do you understand?"

The frightened man had nodded, more out of reflex than understanding.

Judson had turned the key, taken a deep breath, and swung open the door. He had thought there would be time to assess the situation before anything happened. He had been wrong. Before seeing anyone or anything, he had heard the sharp crack of gunshot and felt a searing pain in his side.

The *homme de couleur* had been frightened into immobility before the door was opened. When he saw Judson's body recoil from the shot, he felt his own body jerk. He turned at the sound of running feet and saw the *petit blanc* rush down the passageway, his knife at the ready. Realizing that the blade was intended for the already injured Judson, he regained his wits. Swiftly and accurately, he brought his boot to the *petit blanc's* crotch with a sickening thud. The man doubled over sharply and fell. His knife clattered uselessly to the ground. The *homme de couleur's* brief courage left him just as suddenly as it had come, and he ran into the fog, calling behind him for Judson to do the same.

Recovered now from the shock, Judson bent over to retrieve the knife. He realized at the same moment that someone had come up behind him.

"Quick, Judson, can you run? Someone is coming!" To Judson's immense relief, it was Jean-Baptiste. The shot had alerted the guards, and shouts and the sound of running feet could be heard inside the compound. He declined Jean-Baptiste's arm for support, and followed him into the fog.

Fortunately, they hadn't far to run to the alleyway and the horses. They had just mounted when Seth, breathless, ran up

to join them. Jean-Baptiste pulled him up behind him, and they rode to the waterfront as fast as the fog would allow. When they neared the area of the government anchorage, Jean-Baptiste raised his hand, warning Judson to slow to a normal pace. The *Liberté* lay in quarantine just beyond the wall of fog.

The slower pace allowed Judson to place a tightly folded handkerchief against the wound beneath his shirt, to stem the bleeding. It was painful, but the ball had only ripped through the flesh of his left side. Another quarter of an inch and it would have missed him entirely. He followed his friends trustingly. The visibility was indeed poor, and there was no activity on the waterfront tonight, yet he wondered why they were slowing down.

As if reading his thoughts, Jean-Baptiste leaned over and spoke. "This must be done with precision and discretion, Judson. My man will be waiting on shore with a boat to row you out to the *Liberté*."

Judson's eyes brightened. "You have taken her!"

"She has been quietly reclaimed and is ready to sail you away. So let's not dawdle and give the soldiers time to find us. Of course, they will think of your ship and come here immediately. But we left them in quite a whirlwind."

"I don't know how to thank you, Jean-Baptiste, for all that you've done. Geneviève is already aboard then?"

Riding so close behind him, Seth could feel Jean-Baptiste's body tense with the question. There was a long silence as neither of the men could bring themselves to answer Judson's inquiry. Filling the void, the fog bells tolled out from the anchored vessels in the harbor, without rhythm and without melody.

Jean-Baptiste was greatly relieved when he saw his man waiting with the boat just ahead. A breeze was beginning to stir and everything was working out on schedule. Now, if he could just get Judson on this ship and away. So much hung in the balance on this one thing. The involvement went beyond Judson now. The lives of the men who had taken the *Liberté* were also at stake. Judson would balk, of course, when he learned about Geneviève, but he *must* be convinced to leave now with the ship. Geneviève's predicament could then be safely dealt with.

"See, my friends, there's the boat. Everything is according to plan," he said, nervously turning to Judson. "Sailing in the

fog will have its own hazards, but it can be done. And you will have the advantage of getting away without notice."

Judson reined in his horse. "Where is she?" he demanded.

Reluctantly, Seth gave him his answer. "She refused to come with us, Judson."

Judson was not sure he had heard Seth correctly. How could she possibly refuse to come? "What did you say?"

"We went to her this morning, Judson. We tried to force her to come with us then, but she wouldn't."

Agitated, Jean-Baptiste broke in. "It's a long story, Judson. You'll learn of it quickly enough. For now, however, I beg you to do as we say."

"You two are speaking in riddles. What is it?" he asked. "I promise you, I will not move from this spot until you tell me what is going on."

"We have no time for guessing games," said Jean-Baptiste resignedly. "Tell him, Seth." He strained to see through the fog, expecting soldiers to descend upon them at any moment.

"When we returned to the house and told her you had been arrested, Jean-Baptiste said something about us being no match for the comte's powers. She took that to mean we couldn't save you, Judson. So she thought she must do it herself—the only way she could, by offering herself to the Comte d'Villiers in exchange for your life."

Judson clutched at his wound and grimaced. "*Damn, damn, damn,*" he muttered. He looked accusingly at the two men. "What were you thinking? How could you let her do such a foolish thing?"

"One moment, Judson," Jean-Baptiste admonished. "We let her do nothing. She pretended to go to bed. We neither knew nor suspected anything until we found her gone the next morning."

"And, of course, we went immediately," continued Seth, "to the comte's lodge. She was alone, but she wouldn't listen to us. She said if we took her by force you would be killed at once and without question. She also said that she had given her word and that her honor was at stake."

"Honor!" shouted Judson. "What has honor to do with the Comte d'Villiers?"

"*S'il vous plaît!*" Jean-Baptiste interrupted. "The ship cannot wait any longer. Judson, if you will kindly silence yourself and board her, Seth and I will deal with the problem of Geneviève, as we have planned."

Judson flushed with anger at these words. "Geneviève is not a problem, Jean-Baptiste. She is my life."

"Your *life*!" sputtered Seth, now equally angry. "She's giving her life to save yours. How dare you question her claim to honor? Can't you understand what she's sacrificing? She agreed to marry him if he would let you escape."

"*Marry?*" Judson asked, feeling a sudden weakness settle over his body. The word reverberated in his head. "She was forced to marry him?"

"Not forced, Judson. She agreed to it. Now, if you will please go to the ship and let Jean-Baptiste and me get on with our plans, we will deliver Geneviève to you by morning."

"Forgive me, both of you. I've been unreasonable. I should never have questioned you. But I cannot go with the ship," he stated firmly. "Not while I know she is with him. I have taken her from him before, and I will do it again."

"But there are only two horses, and you've been injured," Seth protested, knowing he did so in vain.

Jean-Baptiste sighed heavily. "Seth, if you will agree to go with the ship, then *someone* will be able to implement our plans. Geneviève must be retrieved and she won't be if we sit here arguing all night." Nudging his horse toward the rowboat, he denied them any further protests.

Jean-Baptiste gave the instructions. "When you are aboard, tell the men to waste no time making their westing. When you are safe, hove-to and wait for the fog to lift. Hopefully, that will be soon. When you have the visibility, sail back in and head for Priest's Cove. It's south along the coast from here and well hidden. The men will know it. Wait for us there, but no longer than twenty-four hours. Do you understand?"

Seth nodded reluctantly and helped the other man push the boat into the water. He turned back to face them. "Good luck," he said grimly. "And protect her with your lives."

## *Chapter 24*

"It's up there, Judson." Jean-Baptiste pointed to the summit of the towering mountain. "We should arrive before daylight."

It had been over an hour since they had left Seth on the beach. They were now on the high, eastern side of Port-au-Prince. Normally, the journey would have taken no more than a quarter of an hour, but they had chosen a more roundabout path. The tedious route was necessary because they could no longer depend on the fog as an ally; nor could they count on the disorganization of the soldiers, who were surely combing the streets for them now. The freshening breeze had begun to disperse the fog almost as soon as they had turned their backs on the beach, and now there was no trace of it. Judson was able to see the object of their destination looming before them in the silvery cast of the moon's light. They entered the tunnel of thick, overhanging trees and started their ascent.

They climbed steadily for an hour before seeing the moon again. The narrow but well-kept road rose steeply, requiring many switchbacks. One of the switchbacks edged far out to the precipice of a cliff, and the view of the city that opened up before them was striking. Port-au-Prince was nestled cozily between the surrounding mountains and the vast expanse of the sea. Jean-Baptiste pointed up in the other direction and



Judson got his first glimpse of the Comte d'Villiers' hunting lodge. The great house jutted out ominously from the side of the mountain near the summit. Judson gazed up at its fortresslike visage. There were no lights in the windows.

"You've been inside the house, Jean-Baptiste. Tell me what you saw so that I won't be totally ignorant in the darkness."

"There will be no opportunity for concealment once we enter the house. The entire ground floor consists of a great open room surrounded on four sides by a second-floor gallery. The bedchambers open onto the gallery. From there, anything in the room below can be seen."

"And I presume we'll be forced to enter rather noisily through the front door, since there will be no one to welcome us."

"There is perhaps a smaller door at the rear of the house."

"Then let's proceed, my friend."

After several more turns, the road leveled onto a plateau before its final rise to the summit. Just ahead of them, the roadway was again illuminated where the moonlight reflected unhampered by the trees. There was a small crossroads. At its center was an object, but the light was not strong enough to make it out. As they approached, the horses became skittish and wild-eyed. The two men rode more slowly, but did not halt their steady advance toward the crossroads. When they were upon it, Jean-Baptiste's horse reared and nearly threw him.

"Oh, my God," Judson groaned.

A wooden stake had been driven into the earth in the exact spot where the two roads met. Tied at his waist to the stake was a man, his upper body slumped forward. Judson jumped from his horse to investigate, while Jean-Baptiste searched his saddlebag for a candle.

The man's naked body gave off a pungent herbal odor. A silk cloth tied around his head partially obscured his face. He was indeed dead. Judson touched the cold and stiffening body and pushed it upright. When Jean-Baptiste lit the candle and held it up to the corpse's head, they gasped. It was the ashen face of the Comte d'Villiers.

The shock of the macabre scene rendered them speechless. There was a gaping hole where the comte's throat had been cut. He had also been sexually mutilated. At his feet stood two vessels. One contained cassava cakes, the other, rum. To one side lay a calabash that appeared to contain blood.

Judson felt his stomach lurch and quickly took his hands from the corpse. As he did, it slumped again and they noticed the crosses cut into the back.

"I have seen this before, Judson. These are the signs of the voodoo ritual of sacrifice. I have seen it done often, but never with a human victim. I don't understand."

"We'll have to cut him down."

"No. We mustn't disturb this scene. I have my own small belief in the rituals and I will not touch him. Even if it was only made to look like voodoo, I strongly advise you to stand away. Others must see this, Judson, just as it is."

"Who could have done it, Jean-Baptiste?"

"That, my friend, is not an easy question to answer. The possibilities number in the hundreds. I have yet to meet a man who approved of the comte. Anyone could have done this and used the ritual signs to lay blame on the blacks."

"Then we must hurry. Geneviève may . . ." He could not bring himself to voice this new fear. Pray God, he pleaded, Geneviève had not also been a victim of this madness.

Judson punished his horse, urging him faster up the tortuous road until at last he reached the imposing stone structure. There was no longer any need to employ cunning to gain entrance to the house. He took the stone steps three at a time. Jean-Baptiste was close behind him when he gained the terrace and sprinted across it. They were prepared to batter in the heavy planked door if necessary, but with Judson's push it swung slowly open, creaking loudly. The two men looked at each other, baffled, as a current of cool air from inside the house wafted over them.

Judson, running again, was the first to enter. The gray light of dawn showed him to the stairs and he did not stop until he was standing before the door at the top. He threw it wide and, in the dim light, saw a body lying across a high bed at one end of the room. He heard Jean-Baptiste behind him as he walked into the room. The casement windows cast patterned moonlight over the figure on the bed. Geneviève was sleeping soundly.

Jean-Baptiste touched Judson's arm. "I will be waiting just outside the door while you wake her."

When Judson heard the door close softly behind him, he approached the small, sleeping figure. Geneviève was lying atop the dark velvet coverlet, fully clothed as if she had only intended to take a brief nap. He lit a candle on the side table

and stepped up to the bed to rest on its edge. She was beautiful in an unusually elaborate gown of cream lace. Although she was evidently deeply asleep, she did not look peaceful. A chestnut strand of hair had fallen across her face. When he gently pushed it back, she stirred and opened her eyes.

She had been dreaming of Judson. When she saw him there, haloed in the dim, wavering candlelight, she felt the odd sensation of being unable to distinguish between her dream and reality. She reached up to touch the vision she saw and her hand met with warmth and the prickly feel of an unshaven cheek. He seems very real, she thought, yet this must be a dream, for surely he couldn't be here on the comte's bed with me. But she yearned for him to be there. More than anything in the world, she wanted him to take her into his strong arms and hold her, protect her so that she would no longer have to worry about the comte and the bleak future that stretched out interminably before her.

"I have come to take you home, my love," Judson said gently.

The words tore at her, spoke her greatest desire, but now they were hurtful because she could not heed them. This was not a dream. Judson was real beside her and she fought the need to melt into his arms. To touch him now would only make her duty to the comte more painful. Why had he suddenly appeared like this to make her suffering greater?

She sat up abruptly, fully awake now. "Why have you come here," she asked angrily, "to make a mockery of me? Do you value your life so little that you have come to laugh at me for thinking it important?"

He smiled at her passion and placed his fingers lightly against her lips to silence her. "You are a most uncommon woman, Geneviève. How could I possibly be so fortunate to have you as my own?"

She pushed aside his hand. "You do not have me, Judson. How can you be so ignorant as to think you do?" She had said it before realizing with embarrassment that he may not yet have seen Seth or Jean-Baptiste, and therefore could not know of her marriage.

"Judson," she began again, "the bitter truth is that you are now free, but I am not. I have bound myself irretrievably to the Comte d'Villiers. I am married, Judson. He is my husband." She could not keep her eyes on his as she said this

last. Her face reddened in anger and shame and she turned away from him.

He reached for her proud chin to pull her back into his gaze. "What I said was true, Geneviève. I have no cause to mock you. I *have* come to take you home, and you *are* mine. You are no longer bound to the comte because the comte is dead!"

Geneviève's eyes widened in surprise. "What did you say?"

"It's true. We came upon him on the mountain road only a short while ago."

As she looked at him, her eyes filled. "Oh, Judson! Can we leave this dreadful place now? I can't bear to spend another moment here." She saw his blood-stained shirt then for the first time. "Judson! You are hurt."

"It's nothing," he laughed. "It was the comte's cunning little trick. He permitted me to escape the prison but had a gunman awaiting me on the outside. I am here to tell about it thanks to the diligence of Seth and Jean-Baptiste."

She pulled aside his torn shirt and saw the blood-soaked handkerchief. He grabbed her hand to prevent her. "There's no time for this now, my love. Let's get away first. I have stopped the bleeding and it will wait until we are aboard the *Liberté*."

"You have not stopped the bleeding, and it will not wait," she insisted, sliding from the bed. Quickly, she drew back the velvet coverlet and pulled the fresh India-cotton sheet from the bed. As she was busy ripping the soft material into long pieces suitable for bandages, there was a commotion at the door. Odile burst through with Jean-Baptiste behind her, trying to restrain her.

"Comtesse d'Villiers," she said hesitantly, still unused to the name and quite taken aback at what she saw. "I heard strange voices." She looked at Judson and then at Jean-Baptiste.

"There is nothing to worry about, Odile. They are friends and mean us no harm," she told the *cocotte*, while continuing at her task. She poured water into a bowl and soaked a strip of the cotton in it. "Remove your shirt, Judson, so that I can bathe the wound."

"Monsieur Talbot is here? In this house?" Odile gasped. She found it difficult to believe. The comte's bitter enemy was now standing, bleeding, in the master's own bedchamber. And his new bride was ministering to the man! She felt weak

at the thought of what the comte would do if he should arrive and find them here together. She had no desire to witness the consequences of such a meeting. And where was he, she wondered?

"Please return to your room, Odile," instructed Geneviève firmly, interrupting the *cocotte's* wild thoughts. "I will call if I need you." Eventually, she would have to tell Odile of the comte's demise, but now was not the time.

Odile obeyed quickly. She wanted no part of this unbelievable situation. But then Geneviève called her back.

"No, wait, Odile. I want you to take this gentleman"—she indicated Jean-Baptiste—"to the stables and wait with him while he procures a carriage. If anyone asks, you are to say it is on the comte's orders. That is all you must say. Odile?"

"Yes, Comtesse. That is all I must say." The *cocotte* was badly frightened, but she intended to obey.

When they had gone, Geneviève bathed Judson's wound and bandaged it tightly. "You must remain as inactive as possible or you will cause it to bleed again," she said sternly. She went to the comte's wardrobe for a fresh shirt and vest. "As odious as it seems, you must wear these. You can't be riding about in blood-soaked clothing all day."

Judson was amused. "How am I to be inactive, my lady, when we must run through the countryside like common criminals?"

"I will make you a bed," she said, smiling and gathering up the velvet from the comte's bed.

"Comtesse," he barked, clicking his heels teasingly.

Jean-Baptiste was waiting for them at the foot of the terrace steps with a covered landau and four fresh horses. Geneviève stopped for a moment to admire the breathtaking view. She pulled her cloak more tightly around her. The sun was up now and the morning had the crisp newness about it that she remembered from early morning rides at Jasper's Landing. She had shunned this view before, consciously turning away from its beauty because it was associated with the Comte d'Villiers. But this was another day.

"Judson," said Jean-Baptiste, "the authorities will have missed your ship by now and think you gone from the island. Yet, I would feel better if you were concealed."

"As you wish, Jean-Baptiste," Judson acquiesced easily. He was beginning to feel weak from loss of blood and the strain of the escape. "But where can I be concealed?"

"I have just the place," he said cheerily, climbing up to the driver's slot. He lifted the padded seat to expose the long tack box in the space beneath.

Judson climbed up and viewed it with displeasure. "I will fit, Jean-Baptiste. But let's hope this won't become my coffin."

"Hush, Judson," scolded Geneviève. "None of us will be comfortable until we are safely on the ship." She smiled then as she handed up the heavy coverlet so that he might line the bottom of the box.

Jean-Baptiste's eyes lit up. "*Mon Dieu!* I have forgotten something very important." When he had run back to the house, Geneviève climbed up to see that Judson was properly settled.

"Don't look so grave, Geneviève. Are you trying to frighten me?" Judson smiled as she lovingly ran her fingers through his hair.

"Oh!" she said, suddenly remembering. "Judson, I must see to Odile before we leave," she explained. "I care for her very much and she must know about the comte."

Odile had come out onto the terrace to watch. Her eyes betrayed her bafflement and fear at Geneviève's sudden and mysterious departure. Geneviève went up to her and placed her hands on the girl's delicate arms.

"Thank you, Odile, for your unquestioning assistance. I must explain to you now. The comte is dead. Murdered. My friends found his body on the road below. It was not they who did it, I swear to you. Now, you must make arrangements for yourself. I would advise you not to remain here. The murderer is unknown, as are his reasons, and you would be safer in town. Is there someone you can go to?"

Odile nodded blankly, overwhelmed. The comte was dead! It seemed impossible that such wealth and power could cease to exist, so quickly and without warning. Her reaction was almost one of relief, which she thought odd. Only a short while ago, this same news would have reduced her to hysterics. She shook away her thoughts and answered Geneviève. "Yes," she said haltingly, "there is my mother."

"Then go to her as quickly as possible. Take a carriage and whatever you need from the house—something valuable so that you may have money on which to live until this business is settled."

"I can not steal from the comte!" she said vehemently.

"You won't be stealing, Odile. I am *giving* you what you need. Don't you see, I am the comte's wife. He had no heirs, so his possessions now rightfully belong to me."

A faint smile crossed Odile's face. "Yes, I see," she said. "I will do as you say."

"Go quickly. As soon as his death is known, soldiers will descend on this place, and they may not treat you kindly. I must leave now, Odile."

"Yes, comtesse," the small woman said with renewed firmness. Her beauty shown forth in her demeanor and Geneviève knew that her future without the comte would be a promising one. A woman as beautiful as Odile would have no worries in Saint-Domingue.

Geneviève was settling herself into the sumptuous leather and inlaid wood of the landau's interior when Jean-Baptiste returned from the house. He carried with him several of the comte's hunting rifles. "These may prove useful. One never knows," he said merrily. "Do you know about guns, *mademoiselle*?" He did not recognize her marriage to the comte, so he ignored her new title.

"Yes, Jean-Baptiste. It so happens that I do," she answered proudly. "I'll load them while you drive."

They are excellent weapons, she found herself thinking as she loaded them; how strange to be admiring the comte's taste now. Two were fairly short hunting rifles of German manufacture with raised carving on the stocks and highly polished brass fittings. The third was longer, an American-made Pennsylvania rifle with a patterned, golden maple stock. She was familiar with both types and was so involved in her task that when the carriage rumbled past the ghastly scene at the crossroads, she saw nothing.

In the guardroom of the prison, the atmosphere was still heavy from the previous night's turbulent activity. The man in charge, Captain Carné, had known of the comte's plot. In fact, he had aided in the planning of its intricate details and had become nearly rich for his troubles. The Comte d'Villiers had been very generous in this delicate matter. However, it now looked as if Captain Carné's troubles were just beginning. Because of the plot's failure and Talbot's successful escape, Carné was being questioned harshly and unmercifully by his commanding general. He wanted to cry out that in

reality he had not neglected the security of his prison. He took too much pride in his duty for that. Yet, he could not reveal that he had accepted a bribe, although surely the general was not above such behavior himself. Where was the comte?

"Why was your security so lax, captain?" the general demanded. "How could such a thing have happened?"

"I think my orders must have been disobeyed, general," replied Carné weakly, trying to spread the blame.

"Why didn't you go to Talbot's ship immediately? Only an idiot wouldn't have supposed that was the very first place he would go. According to reports, the ship was not discovered missing until a full *hour* after the escape!"

"General, the fog," he pleaded.

"The fog, ha! You have made a laughingstock of us, captain, and you *will* suffer the consequences. If you are not court-martialed immediately, which I sincerely hope is the case, you can expect to spend the remainder of your service in the most dreadfully remote section of France's most impoverished colony."

Suddenly, Captain Dubondieu burst into the guardroom, beaming from ear to ear. Following at his heels was a smug-faced *petit blanc*. Dubondieu was Carné's most avid and vicious rival. Both men were exhausting themselves trying to do each other in in their quest for promotion. Carné's intense hatred for his adversary was not lessened by his timely intrusion but any diversion now would be a welcome one.

"I have good news for you, general," announced Captain Dubondieu with his usual arrogance. "It seems I have found the missing *Liberté*."

The general threw Captain Carné a disdainful glance and turned to welcome Dubondieu with what Carné thought was undue effusion.

Dubondieu jerked his thumb toward the *petit blanc*. "This man has just informed me that a ship lies unreported in Priest's Cove, and that it bears the quite familiar name of *Liberté*," he said, drawing out the syllables of the name for emphasis. "He says that she lies quietly and appears to be waiting for someone."

"And we can guess who that someone may be, can we not, Captain Carné?" The general grinned. "Talbot has not left



the island! *Mon Dieu*, we have been given a reprieve. Now we won't be forced to suffer the Comte d'Villiers' wrath for losing his prisoner."

Captain Carné felt a flash of anger at the mention of the comte, the one responsible. If he were here, he could relieve this intolerable pressure and settle the situation. After all, he even had the general under his powerful thumb.

"You must see that this informer is richly rewarded, captain," said the general, happy to be in control again.

Dubondieu looked even more pleased with himself. "There will be no need of money exchange, general. This man has a long-standing smuggling charge pending against him. To drop the charge will be reward enough, I'm sure." Upon hearing this pronouncement, the *petit blanc's* face, which had lit up at the general's suggestion, fell.

"Come, gentlemen," said the general, "we have our *duty* to perform." He glared again at Captain Carné. "But before we go, let us deposit our tired captain of the guards in a place where he may rest without any more rude interruptions. Place him in the cell from which our illustrious Talbot escaped," he instructed the astonished guards. "I'm certain you won't find it confining, Captain Carné. Talbot surely did not."

The general was so pleased with Captain Dubondieu's performance that he conferred with him in private concerning a proper course of action. This was the general's habit. He had advanced to his high rank merely by using his skill at singling out his most brilliant underlings and using their expertise as his own. The officers were rewarded by pleasing their superior, so the method was beneficial all around.

"As you pointed out, general, Talbot has not left the island," said Captain Dubondieu officiously. "When he is ready to leave, we know his mode of transportation. It seems to me that all we need do is lie in wait for him near Priest's Cove and let him come to us."

"Correct, captain." The general squinted at the man to bring him into focus and confirm his original judgment of his intelligence. "Of course, you don't think that the ship might be a ploy to draw our attention? It seems odd to me that Talbot would go to such great pains to secure his ship and then lounge about before using it to flee."

The general's suggestion struck fear into Dubondieu's calmness, but he attempted to conceal it. One must never

display doubt before a commanding officer, he repeated to himself. "Oh, no, general. I'm certain of it," he said, hoping that his voice did not betray him.

"Good, then. Take the men you need and see to it at once, captain. That slippery devil may be making his move at this very moment!"

## *Chapter 25*

Geneviève placed the loaded rifles under the seat. Now there was something she must do for herself. She reached into the inside pocket of her cloak and withdrew several papers. One of them was the heavy parchment certificate of marriage. Signed and sealed, it was a very official-looking document. It had also become extremely valuable. It was proof that all the comte's wealth—a great fortune, his houses and lands—now belonged to her, Geneviève West d'Binet, to do with as she pleased. Her marriage and her husband's death had taken place so quickly and under such unpleasant circumstances that she hadn't yet had time to consider this aspect of their legal bond. Who would have believed that events would have worked out in this extraordinary way?

She felt chiefly relieved and pleased that such wealth and power was now out of the hands of the Comte d'Villiers. He had used it only for evil, for the cruel manipulation of others. But the money and her new responsibilities in Saint-Domingue did not concern her as much as her desire to get away from the island with Judson as quickly as possible. However, there were a few things she could not leave undone. The most important of which was the matter of the welfare of the comte's slaves and servants, numbering in the hundreds. In the confusion caused by his sudden death, the people who depended on him for their daily necessities would

probably be neglected. They could best be served if the houses and lands were to continue in their usual operation until a further solution could be found. And there was another problem. Most of the comte's business associates were as unscrupulous as he, and would seek to profit from his demise. But she knew of a way to stop this perpetuation of evil.

The other papers she had taken with her were blank. She had also brought along a quill and a small vial of ink. Considering the circumstances, Geneviève had been thinking with exceptional clarity before they left the mountain house.

On these blank pages, she began to compose a document that would name Jean-Baptiste Lacour as her agent in all matters of business concerning the d'Villiers estate. She smiled at her awkward attempt to write in the swaying carriage. Whoever sees this, she thought, will think the comte's wife was a mere child who had not yet mastered the art of script. But this and the marriage certificate should satisfy the authorities.

The landau rolled out of the leafy tunnel that covered the mountain road and entered the purlieus of Port-au-Prince. Jean-Baptiste felt that they had completed the most dangerous part of the journey. He had feared each turn in the road on their descent, expecting at any moment to see a detachment of government soldiers riding toward them in search of the Comte d'Villiers. They must think it odd by now that he had not arrived to confer with them about Judson. They would certainly stop the landau and question its occupants. If denied any knowledge of his whereabouts, the soldiers would go on to find his body at the crossroads and come after them as suspects. Yet, telling the truth would have sounded absurd: Yes, we have just seen him, he lies in the road just ahead! Thankfully, they had been spared the confrontation. All that remained now was to pass through the town as an innocent carriage bearing a beautiful passenger. Who could suspect that?

Inside the landau, Geneviève sat stiffly upright. She did not share Jean-Baptiste's feeling that the danger was past. She worried about Judson in the uncomfortable tack box. Why was Jean-Baptiste driving so slowly, as though they were out for a mere pleasure ride? Didn't he understand that Judson needed medical attention as soon as possible? She prayed that

nothing would go wrong before they reached the ship. Jean-Baptiste had been cheery about bringing along the rifles, but the thought of them under her seat caused her to drum her damp fingers nervously against each other.

She parted the curtain and looked out. The route Jean-Baptiste was taking was necessarily the most direct to the Coast Road. It had not been planned, but it would take them past both the town house of the comte and the garishly painted house of Madame Bourget.

The comte's townhouse was closed for the hot season, but she recalled with vividness its lavish rooms. His bedchamber, especially, still haunted her memory. Madame Bourget's house looked deceptively quiet from the outside. She remembered waking up inside that house after being delivered there by the vile Jacques Argo. Her bad memories of this island had begun in that house. She vowed that some day she would see that Simone Bourget received her condign punishment. She could not determine whom she hated more, Bourget or d'Villiers. At least, the comte had not tried to have her murdered.

Geneviève realized that she was working herself into a fury and sat back abruptly, letting the curtain fall back into place. She thought that she had seen enough of this town and this island. The idea of returning here in the future was not a pleasant one. Perhaps it wouldn't be necessary. Her unpleasant thoughts were interrupted as the landau came to a halt.

She peeked out into the narrow street to see why they had stopped. The carriage was surrounded by soldiers. Jean-Baptiste had not seen the trap until it was too late. The street was not wide enough to permit turning back, so he rode straight into them and stopped. He thought it must be a routine check.

With her heart in her throat, Geneviève sat back. She heard Jean-Baptiste greet them heartily. *Please, don't let them find him*, she repeated to herself.

The cab door was opened and she beamed at the tall, handsome soldier who gazed in at her. His eyes lit up at seeing such an agreeably proportioned woman. He bowed deeply and clicked his heels in a military fashion. "Pardon, *mademoiselle*. We have our orders," he told her and closed the door. They were away again.

They gained the coast road and turned south. After an-

other hour of nervous driving, Jean-Baptiste was beginning to feel giddy. They hadn't much further to go now, he thought happily. The carriage came up over a slight rise and from there the road stretched out in a long, straight line. In the far distance, he saw what he had dreaded most. A group of mounted soldiers waited for them. They must have found the ship, for they were almost upon it.

Captain Dubondieu waited patiently for the carriage to reach them. Perhaps this was the one that carried his prize. He stood in his stirrups and squinted. He thought the vehicle stopped, but now he could see that it was advancing steadily toward him and his men.

He was pleased with himself and certain of success. He had stationed another group of men further south along the road, in case Talbot approached the cove from that direction. The secluded cove and the *Liberté* lay between the two groups of soldiers. Anyone attempting to reach the vessel would have to pass through one of the roadblocks. The sea was to the right and the scrubby, tangled morass to the left provided no access. Talbot must come along this road.

Dubondieu had cleverly left the ship alone. Since the road was hidden from view, no one aboard her could possibly know of the trap he had set. Their ignorance would prevent them from signaling their unwary captain.

He smiled at his competence as he looked at his sprightly men in their vividly colored uniforms and their shiny over-the-knee boots with spurs. Things could not have worked out better.

Jean-Baptiste's reaction was swift. He stopped the horses, at the same time calling out to alert Geneviève. She was standing by the open door of the landau when he reached her.

"We mustn't hesitate," he said firmly. "There are soldiers on the road ahead. If we turn back, we will arouse their suspicions and they will come after us. You must drive Judson through, Geneviève. It is our only chance." He ducked into the cab for two of the rifles. Handing her one, he instructed, "Keep this at your feet and use it if you must. But, if you play your role to the hilt, Geneviève, the gun shouldn't be necessary. Can you do it?"

"I will do my best, Jean-Baptiste. But what about you?"

"The cove lies just beyond that promontory. I can get there faster on foot along the beach. I'll await you there after I signal the ship to prepare for trouble. If it looks as though you haven't passed the roadblock, we'll come after you. The side road to the cove lies less than a mile beyond the soldiers. It's marked by a huge oblong boulder. You must hurry now," he urged and disappeared into the grove of mango trees that led to the beach.

Judson felt like a trapped animal. He had heard their conversation, and now he heard Geneviève climb into the driver's seat and unleash the reins. He cursed under his breath and maneuvered himself onto his stomach. There was nothing he could do but wait. His hand sweated against his pistol grip. He did not think of himself capable of running far. If the soldiers caught them, he only hoped Jean-Baptiste could reach them before anything happened to Geneviève. No harm could come to her unless she tried to protect him, and that was what he feared most.

Captain Dubondieu urged his horse into the center of the road as the carriage neared. His men formed a line behind him. This was an unusually fine landau, he noted, but how odd . . . the driver appeared to be a woman. He tensed then. It might be Talbot himself, disguised as a woman. But the size of the driver soon overruled his suspicions. *Mon Dieu*, he thought, it is a woman.

Geneviève reined in the horses and smiled down at Captain Dubondieu. "How far have I come from town?" she asked sweetly, drawing back the hood of her cloak and shaking her auburn hair loose.

"I beg your pardon, *mademoiselle*?" This was an exceptionally beautiful woman, but what an unusual question she had put before him. He racked his brain to decide why such a woman should be driving a carriage through these parts, and alone at that. She appeared so confident that he hesitated to question her at the risk of seeming ignorant.

"I say," she laughed, "how far have I come from town? Surely, you know? I would expect our officers to know such details."

"From this spot, *mademoiselle*, it is exactly four miles to Port-au-Prince."

"Oh," she said, sounding crestfallen. "Then I have six more miles to go."

"I beg your pardon, *mademoiselle*?" He admonished himself. What an idiotic reply. She must think him dim-witted.

"*Madame*, captain. You have mistaken me for an unmarried woman, I believe."

"I beg your pardon, *madame*." *Damnation*. He had done it again! He strove to think of something intelligent to say that might redeem him in her eyes. "Don't you think it dangerous for a lovely lady such as yourself to be driving alone on this road? It's well known that it is frequently traveled by smugglers and other criminals. You *are* alone, I presume?"

"I am quite alone, captain."

"And you aren't afraid?"

"Of course I'm not afraid. We're having a game, captain, a race along ten miles of this road. My husband shouldn't be far behind me, but since his carriage is filled to the brim with our friends, he must drive more slowly. I'm in the lead, but I won't be for long if you persist in detaining me."

Captain Dubondieu shook his head at the absurd pleasures of the rich. "*Madame*, you must forgive this interruption, but we are on very important business for the Crown. We are expecting to trap a notorious criminal who we believe will come along this way at any moment. I must urge you to return with your party to town. There may be great danger," he warned sternly, straightening his spine in an air of self-importance.

"Captain!" Geneviève exclaimed. "Do what you must, but please don't rob me of my certain success. After all, I'm only passing through your area and won't be around for the excitement." She lifted her eyebrows coquettishly and smiled down at Dubondieu. "Although it does sound like fun."

*Mon Dieu*, muttered Captain Dubondieu to himself. I must get rid of this woman, he thought, before she decides to become a spectator. It won't do to have a drunken party milling around to hinder my duty.

"I see your point, *madame*. You may pass," he said, moving out of her way. It was a highly unusual allowance to make and bad policy, but the consequences could be far worse if he did not let her go.

As the landau jerked forward, Dubondieu stood in his stirrups to glance into the cab. He had suddenly realized that he hadn't even attempted to search the carriage. Unfortunately, the curtains were drawn and he could see nothing. He glanced quickly at his men to see if they had caught his



ineptitude, but he could determine nothing from their dour faces. He definitely should have searched. He wondered to himself why beautiful women always made him lose his wits.

Judson had to restrain himself from chuckling aloud at Geneviève's performance. Through a crack running along the side of the tack box, he had seen the sheepish face of the captain as he tried to deal with her. He relaxed somewhat as Geneviève quickly left the soldiers behind and, with a sigh, thought of how close they were to the haven of the *Liberté*. His side hurt. He put his hand to the wound and felt fresh blood. He was aghast at how much he had lost. A small pool had formed on the wooden bottom of the box and was *dripping through the unchinked boards*.

Captain Dubondieu had begun to worry that the general had been right. Perhaps the *Liberté* was a ploy and Talbot was long gone from the island. That would make him look a proper fool for waiting here with such ceremony. He was growing impatient and nervous when he looked down and saw the fresh blood. He felt his chest tighten as he realized that something was terribly wrong. His thoughts were jangled. He deduced that *he* was not bleeding. The blood had to have come from the landau that had just stood there. The *landau*. He raised his eyes slowly to watch it speeding away in the distance.

When Judson realized that his blood must have dripped onto the road where they had stopped, he called out to warn Geneviève. She looked back at the soldiers and saw that they had started after her.

"They've seen it, Judson, and they're coming this way!" she called back. "Stay put and let me handle this."

Her mind worked feverishly. There was a bend in the road just ahead. Hopefully, the oblong boulder marking the road to the cove would be just beyond it. She could either run for it or come up with some explanation for the silly captain. She took the curve on two wheels and her heart sank. There was no boulder in sight.

Out of the soldier's view for the moment, she used this brief advantage to bring the carriage to a halt. The Comte d'Villier's coachman had paid careful attention to the details of his job. Affixed to the inside of the driver's footbox was a

large, leather-sheathed knife, presumably for cutting the harnesses in case of an accident. She grabbed the knife and jumped to the ground. She tried not to think of what she had to do as she went up to the silky black mare behind the righthand lead horse. She held the horse's head and, with the knife, knicked the heavy muscular mass of her shoulder near the harness that ran along her back. Geneviève knew that a surface cut in that area would bleed copiously for a short while but would soon close and heal itself. She was back on the landau and driving when the soldiers rounded the bend and caught up with her.

"*Madame*, there is a problem," said Captain Dubondieu breathlessly. "There is blood, uh . . ." He stumbled over his words. "There was blood on the road where you were halted and I thought, perhaps, there was trouble."

"Trouble, captain?" asked Geneviève demurely.

"What I mean to say, *madame*, is that I think we must make a closer inspection of your carriage. Do you have a passenger? Perhaps a wounded passenger?"

"A wounded passenger?" She laughed. "How absurd, captain. Why would I be carrying a wounded passenger along on a race? You have very strange ideas for a military man. Has my husband paid you to detain me further? If so, it is most ungallant of you."

"But, *madame*, there *was* blood on the road," he insisted. He reminded himself not to become flustered again.

"Then have your blood, captain," she said irritably. "Perhaps you should inspect my horses for an injury. But please do it quickly, as my husband will be overtaking me soon."

"Captain," called out one of the men, laughing, "*madame* is right. This black mare is bleeding, sure enough."

"Now may I go, captain?"

"Yes, *madame*, you may go." Dubondieu's voice was weak. He had made an ass of himself again. The men had noticed it this time. This damned woman might be beautiful, but he only wanted her out of his sight.

Geneviève assumed a haughty expression and drove on around the next bend. *There was the boulder*. She turned onto the narrow pathway beside it, wincing as the tree branches scraped harshly against the sides of the carriage. The way was rough and the landau swayed and lurched crazily. She thought of Judson being jolted around inside the tack box and

prayed that the journey would soon be over. Finally, the trees opened up onto a wide, sandy beach and she saw Jean-Baptiste waving and running toward her. A small boat held by two burly men waited in the shallows.

Captain Dubondieu was leading his sulky men back to their original position. He thought he heard one of them whispering and jerked around to admonish him. Just as he turned, something caught his eye. He gasped. The uppermost sections of the *Liberté's* masts were visible over the treetops, and on them the topsails were being unfurled. The ship was getting underway and that meant that Talbot had slipped by him!

"Quick!" he ordered, startling the men into action. "The ship is leaving!"

The tiny boat was nearly awash from the weight of its four passengers as it was rowed toward the *Liberté*. Geneviève sat alone in the bow to help balance the boat. Concern creased her brow as she watched Judson riding unsteadily on the stern. His face was ashen from the loss of blood. She turned anxiously to assess their progress toward the *Liberté* and saw Seth leaning over the ship's railing. He was pointing toward the shore.

The loud rumbling of the huge anchor chain being wrenched in was drowned out by the thundering sound of horses' hooves clattering over the rocky pathway leading from the road. The men at the oars increased their pace when they saw what was happening.

Jean-Baptiste, concealed in the underbrush, watched helplessly as the soldiers rode onto the beach and jumped from their horses. Their crimson-faced captain was screaming orders in a high-pitched voice as they knelt and prepared to fire. The explosion of gunfire was deafening as he kept his eyes trained on the tiny, rocking boat.

Geneviève's body recoiled involuntarily as the shots pinged menacingly into the water around the boat. She felt herself moving in time with the furiously rowing men as she silently urged them on.

Jean-Baptiste raised his rifle and had the wildly gesticulating captain in his sights when he saw that there would be no need for him to reveal himself. By the time the soldiers reloaded their guns, the boat would be out of range. He lowered his rifle and watched as the boat and her precious

cargo, intact and unharmed, was wrenched aboard the *Liberté*. The great ship was listing under sail almost immediately. She slipped with a marvelous silence and swiftness through the narrow breach, to disappear behind the promontory.

## Chapter 26

Geneviève awoke to the sound of creaking timbers and the rhythmical surge of the *Liberté* moving gracefully through the waves. The light of mid-morning was streaming in through the tiny square panes of glass at the rear of the cabin. She was confused as to her location. She knew, of course, that she was aboard the *Liberté*, but the last she remembered she was sitting on the edge of Judson's bed redressing his wound. She had planned to remain at his side throughout the night. When she looked around, she was embarrassed to see that she had done exactly that! She had fallen asleep beside him, yet neither had been aware of the other's presence.

Judson's color had returned and he looked much better. Soon after they had boarded the ship, she and Seth urged him, protesting, into bed. She cleaned and rebandaged his wound, and he had gone immediately to sleep. There was no reason to disturb him now. If he were awake, he would demand to be up and about. Geneviève rose quietly from the bed.

Washed and rested from the long sleep, she stepped onto the heaving deck and felt an exhilaration as she breathed in the crisp morning air. The ship was heading steadily northeast through the restless Gulf Stream and the fresh breeze was churning up white caps on the waves. She inhaled deeply and was refreshed by the salt spray that misted her face each time the heavy brig plunged into the swells. Pulling her cloak

tightly around her, she gazed up into a deep azure, cloudless sky. The sight of the straining sails was a joyous one—they were taking her home.

Seth was sitting alone in the bow, his arm resting on his knee. He was looking off into the distance. The noise of the ship's motion masked her approach. He turned to smile when Geneviève sat down beside him.

"Isn't this a beautiful morning?" she greeted him.

"The best I've seen in a long while, Geneviève. Is Judson better?"

"He's still sleeping and I didn't want to disturb him."

"The best thing for him now," he said distractedly.

Geneviève noticed the distant look in his eyes. "What were you thinking when I came along just now?"

He turned to her and smiled. "I was thinking how odd it is, the two of us returning home this way. When I left Savannah, I didn't know if I'd find you, but I thought if I returned with you, I would be in the company of my future wife."

"It's difficult for me to believe, too, Seth," she agreed, taking his hand in hers.

"Yet," he hastened to add, "things have worked out as they should. When you spoke about our relationship lacking a vital part, I, too, knew the truth of it. I had thought it myself, but could never admit it."

"We'll always be close friends, Seth. Our mistake was in trying for something more." She noticed then his familiar teasing expression.

"What is it you're keeping from me, Seth McKenna?"

"I may as well tell you, Geneviève," he said with studied seriousness. "As you have released me from my promise of marriage, I shall be forced to waste no time in courting the affections of Miss Anne Pierce."

"Anne Pierce? Seth, she's just a child."

"She wasn't a child the last time I saw her, Geneviève. She had come to stay with Mother just as I left Savannah. She has grown into a most fetching woman. You know that she's only two years younger than you. You'll be surprised when you see her."

She squeezed his hand in happiness. "No wonder you're sitting here so anxiously! I think you want this voyage to end even sooner than I do." She laughed.

Geneviève found Judson awake when she returned to the cabin. She arrived just in time to order him back into bed.

"But I was about to shave. Look at this beard, Geneviève. Do you wish me to arrive in Savannah with this face and be introduced as your future husband?"

"I will shave you, Judson," she said, taking the razor from his hand. "I want my future husband to be alive and well, first of all. Appearances are secondary."

He lay back against the head of the bed and allowed her to lather his face. As she leaned forward to attain the correct angle for the razor, he saw the huge diamond pendant around her neck. He thought she must have concealed it before, or he would surely have noticed such an extraordinary stone.

"That is a striking pendant, Geneviève. Was it a gift from the comte?"

"Yes and no," she answered, intent at her task. She was trying to balance against the ship's motion and shave this talkative man at the same time.

"A most satisfactory explanation, my love," he said as the blade neared the cleft in his chin.

Geneviève was enjoying her game with him. Her green eyes sparkled. "Please don't talk so, Judson. This is difficult enough as it is, and very dangerous."

"I trust you, my lady, with my very life. But tell me about the diamond."

"The comte purchased it for me in Port-au-Prince," she said, resisting a smile. "I was very flattered."

"And I see you take great pleasure in continuing to wear it," he said huffily.

Geneviève put aside the razor and wiped his face. "There, that's much better. Now, were you not expressing interest in the d'Binet diamond?"

"The d'Binet diamond? You're making no sense, woman. I was speaking of the diamond at your throat."

She smiled and ran her fingers through his thick hair. "I was teasing you, Judson. I made light of something that was very serious at the time. I was wearing this diamond on the night Guy-Pierre was killed. It was stolen from me but turned up for sale in a Port-au-Prince shop. The comte spent a great deal to buy it for me but, unknowingly, he was only repossessing it. I was forced to restrain my pleasure at having it back, since I had been led to believe he was the one responsible for Guy-Pierre's murder. I couldn't let him know who I was."

Judson reached for her and pulled her on top of him. "You continue to amaze me, Geneviève. I consider myself a lucky

man to have you." He looked deeply into her eyes. "And I must have you at this very moment."

She pushed gently away from him. "No, Judson, your wound. You mustn't exert yourself."

"Did I mention exertion?" he asked as he reached for the buttons of her dress. "I ask only for the sweet touch of your skin against mine. You won't let me up from the bed to sail my ship, so what *am* I allowed to do?"

His hand was stroking her naked back and she could think of no other words with which to admonish him. Nor did she want to.

He rested against her, their bodies still pressed together. "I have never before made love in a ship under full sail, Geneviève."

"Do you plan to do this often in the future, captain?"

"As often as my future wife will allow."

She rose on her elbow and looked at him. "Judson," she said, her voice registering concern. "I cannot spend the rest of my life aboard this ship. There is Jasper's Landing and . . ."

"Sshhh," he soothed, gently smoothing her hair from her cheek. "And I cannot be a planter, my love. Jasper's Landing will be our home, where I will spend my happiest days and where we will raise our children. But the sea is too much a part of my life to give it up completely, Geneviève." When he saw her chin begin to lift in a pout, he sighed. "What is it now?"

"That means you'll be leaving me again."

"Only for a short time. And I'll always return."

"You have made promises to me before, Judson Talbot," she challenged him mockingly.

"This one, my lady, won't be difficult to keep." His laughter was broken off as she closed her lips over his.



## *Afterword*

Geneviève smiled with contentment from her place at the head of the long, lace-covered table. Candlelight flickered on the soft apricot dining room walls, casting a mellow glow across the features of her guests. This was the first entertainment she had given since her return to Jasper's Landing a month ago. But more important, it was her first social occasion since her quiet marriage to Judson Talbot.

The ceremony had been held in the blue salon, the same beautiful room in which her presentation ball would have taken place, had not tragedy altered her life irrevocably. She thought sadly of Guy-Pierre and the pleasure he would have taken in her marriage. But she would not rail against fate. The scheme of her life had unfolded as if destined for this happy moment. And without the experiences of Saint-Domingue, would she have found Judson again?

Her gaze traveled to the opposite end of the table, where her husband laughed with Rachel over some shared confidence. Both Ellen and Rachel were unabashed in their admiration for Judson, and both women were delighted that a man's influence would once again be felt at Jasper's Landing.

On Judson's left, Anne Pierce tilted her head gracefully toward Seth to hear his remark. When he had finished speaking, she looked up at him with shining eyes. Geneviève smiled at the tender exchange. She had been delighted, but slightly puzzled by Seth's seemingly sudden and intense

interest in Anne that morning on the bow of the *Liberté*. Her surprise had sprung from her memory of Anne as a shy girl, little more than a child. With pleasure and relief, Geneviève discovered that Anne had become a lovely and charming young woman.

Geneviève turned to Ellen, seated on her right. Her eyes held a question as she touched the woman's hand.

"Yes, dear," Ellen responded. "This would be an appropriate moment."

As Ellen rose, Geneviève was conscious that the older woman had never looked happier than she did tonight.

"Dear friends, I would like for you to be the first to share with me the happy knowledge of Seth's betrothal to my beloved Anne."

Laughter and delighted clapping filled the room as each guest embraced the happy couple. When the room was again quiet, Judson stood, his wine glass lifted to the company. "I would like to propose a toast to Anne and Seth," he said. "May their days together be many, and their marriage filled with such love as mine and Geneviève's."

His keen Mediterranean-blue eyes were centered on her. They were so filled with tenderness that she felt the color rise to her cheeks. She quickly lifted her goblet and drank, hoping no one had noticed.

When the last of their friends had retired to the guest wing of the house, Judson and Geneviève climbed the stairs to their room.

"Geneviève," Judson said. "There is something I haven't told you."

"What is it?" she asked, feeling a slight twinge of alarm.

"No, my love," he said, smiling and drawing her to him. "I didn't intend to frighten you. It's just that I have a surprise for you. I think you'll find it a pleasurable one."

From the armoire he removed a heavy parcel and placed it in her hands. She struggled with the bulky wrappings. "This is from you, Judson?" she asked.

"No, from a friend," he teased. "A wedding gift, I believe."

She sighed in admiration as she lifted the delicate epergne from the last of the wrapping paper. Holding the piece in both hands, she turned it gently in the candlelight to examine the exquisite workmanship. Her voice broke, and her green eyes filled with tears.

"Jean-Baptiste, the goldsmith," she whispered. "He fashioned this for us."

"Yes." Judson smiled. "A message for you came with it." Geneviève sat beside Judson to unfold the letter, her head resting against his shoulder. She smiled, remembering the jaunty, elegant Jean-Baptiste as she read aloud.

*Dear Madame Talbot,*

*It was with pleasure and no surprise that I received your letter informing me of your marriage to Judson. Please accept my wishes for every happiness, my friends. With this letter I send a small gift to you. Though I am forbidden to practice my trade, on special occasions I wink at this restriction. I considered your wedding an excellent reason to take up the tools of the artisan, however briefly.*

*Madame Talbot, I have contacted Jean and Marie, as you wished, offering to both a passage to Savannah. Though they are appreciative, they feel that Saint-Domingue is their home and they must remain here. I concur with this decision. Marie is a woman of strength and will be a source of wisdom to the people. Both she and Jean wish to convey their gratitude and friendship to you.*

*As to your extensive holdings in Saint-Domingue, all is well. Following your instructions, I have found a buyer for Bel Jardin and the other residences included in the estate. His status is one of which you would approve. He is an elderly Frenchman, with a number of grown children. There exists every reason to believe he would be a benevolent master of Bel Jardin. He is also well able to meet the price that was discussed. I await your decision on the matter.*

*I laugh as I write to you, Judson, at the fate of your first mate, André. It seems he is well content to stay in the Spanish territory, where he grows rich from his good fortune in the cock fights. His message to you is that he remains constant, waiting for the day the Liberté puts out to sea.*

*I hesitate in my last bit of news, as it is not my wish to revive unpleasant memories. However, reports of this event will surely reach you by other means. It has been*

discovered by the authorities that the death of the Comte d'Villiers was arranged by Simone Bourget. Though the actual murder was perpetrated by a bocor of her acquaintance, it was she who encouraged the man.

By the use of voodoo signs at the death scene, she hoped to fix the blame on the comte's slaves. But her agent was ill-chosen. He, being black, in turn betrayed her with the intention of stirring the hatred of the grands blancs against the gens de couleur. At this time, the woman awaits execution in the prison compound in Port-au-Prince. Were the truth known, this last may well be the least of her crimes.

My friends, there is far more to this sordid story than the stranger to Saint-Domingue might perceive. At the heart of this violence lies a racial and class hatred of an intensity that will one day bring this society to ruin. The anger smolders in the streets, the plantations . . . I see so clearly that life as we have known it on this island draws swiftly to a close. I rejoice that you will not be here to witness the upheavals that will surely come. As for your friend, Jean-Baptiste, I must remain. Saint-Domingue is my home. She is to me as a cherished but treacherous lover, both my life and my sorrow.

With deepest affection,  
Jean-Baptiste Lacour